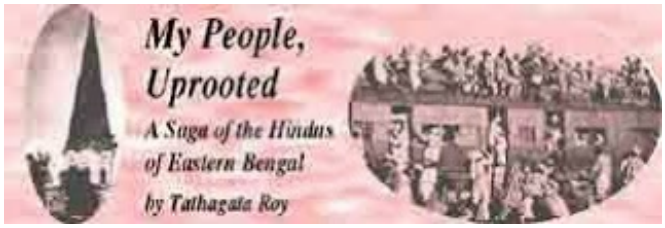
A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-1-background-pre-partition.html

Chapter 1



THE BACKGROUND : PRE-PARTITION BENGALI SOCIETY

This is a strange story of persecution, ethnic cleansing based on religion, related politics and en masse delusion, partly self-induced. As stories of persecutions in recent times go, the story is quite horrible, though by no means unparalleled. The Jews had been subject to much worse persecution in Europe through the ages, which reached its climax in Hitler's Germany ; so had the Blacks in the segregation-era U. S. South and in apartheid-era South Africa, the Armenians in Turkey, Native Americans in the United States, Aborigenes in Australia. What Pol Pot, the Maoist dictator, did to his fellow Cambodians was many times more horrendous. The phrase 'ethnic cleansing' was coined during the expulsion of Bosnian or Albanian Muslims from the Serb-dominated areas of Bosnia or Kosovo, in the Nineteen-nineties. That ethnic cleansing was also quite horrible. Politics, mainly of self-aggrandizement of a few petty (and petty-minded) leaders at the cost of a hapless multitude is at the root of all these, and is an unfortunate, though essential, element. Also, not at all unusual.

It is in the delusional element that this story takes the cake. Certainly very few times in human history, probably never, have a group of people been subjected to mass destruction, eviction, arson, pillage, murder, bestiality, mayhem and massacre, and especially rape and brutalisation of their womenfolk, and thereafter have been told, partly by some of their own compatriots and leaders but also by others, that all this never happened. That in the interest of something very laudable called 'communal harmony', this is best forgotten, the faster the better, so that once the generation that went through it dies away, there would remain no records and no memory, neither smriti nor shruti. Then there is self-created or self-magnified guilt. If it happened at all, it was the victims' own fault, because the victims (when they were not victims) didn't talk nicely to the poor rapists and murderers (when they were not rapists and murderers), made them stand outside the house while they talked to them (Musolmandere amra daoay uthte dei nai, niche dara karaiya katha kaitam) ; aren't rape and murder just punishment for such behaviour? Finally there is transfer of guilt. If there was anyone to blame for this it was not the people who took part in the mayhem and rape, but the people who gave refuge to the victims, because the refuge they gave was not good enough. That the villains were only apparently so, and the victims were damned anyway. That the real blame belonged not to the perpetrators, but to those who had led them

astray (namely the British), and taught them to hate people who did not profess the same religion. That copious tears ought to be shed for the people after they were dispossessed and beaten, but looking at who had beaten and dispossessed them, and how, was verboten. All in the name of communal harmony, of course.

In short this is a story of standing logic and common sense on its head ; and of hiding the truth, passing off half-truths as the truth, adding a lot of garbage to the truth. The result of all this is that the exodus of Hindus from East Bengal does not figure in the list of great refugee movements of the world, although some eight million moved out – more than the present population of Switzerland. Even an approximate figure is not officially available. On the other hand, much smaller refugee movements such as those of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda and Timor have found a place in the annals of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Yes, there was one phase of movement which has found a place in the records. It is the exodus of Bengali Hindus and Muslims from erstwhile East Pakistan to India (mainly West Bengal) in the wake of Pakistani crackdown during the Bangladesh Liberation War. But not the exodus of the Hindus over the preceding twenty-three years.

But let us put first things first and take a look at the protagonists.

Bengalis are a people who speak the language Bengali, or Bangla, and had been living in Bengal, a province of the erstwhile British India. Calcutta was the capital of Bengal, and the city also used to double as the capital of British India till 1911 when it lost that honour to New Delhi. They still live there, that is to say in the land mass which once formed Bengal, with some serious redistribution of population with which this book is vitally concerned. The only difference is that there is no longer any place called Bengal. What was once Bengal is now divided principally into two parts, the Indian state of West Bengal and the Sovereign Republic of Bangladesh.

It cannot be said that the Bengalis as a people, are not worthy of note. It has been said that they are possessed of considerable intellectual prowess, alertness and openness of mind. It has also been said that they are irritable, indolent, argumentative, and tend to defy authority without any reason at all. Going by quite objective standards however, quite a few Bengalis have made their prominent marks in this world. Of the five ethnic Indians who have so far been awarded the Nobel Prize, namely Rabindra Nath Tagore[1], C.V.Raman[2], Hargobind Khorana[3], S. Chandrasekhar[4] and Amartya Sen[5], (not counting Mother Teresa[6]) two are Bengalis – Bengali Hindus actually, the first and the last. The third and the fourth are full-blooded Indians as well as Indian-born, though they later became U.S. citizens. Apart from these Nobel Laureates, Bengal can boast of such intellectual giants in different walks of life as the monk Swami Vivekananda[7], the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee[8], the philosopher and mystic Sri Aurobindo[9], the scientists Jagadis Chandra Bose[10] and Satyendra Nath Bose[11], the archaeologist Rakhaldas Banerjee[12], the jurist Radha Binode Pal[13]

, to name but very few.

One feature that distinguishes Bengalis is that they are unusually proud of, and exhibit an extraordinary attachment to their language, Bangla. The Bangla language is one of the several North Indian tongues descended from Prakrit and Sanskrit, and is written in a script that is very close to Devnagri, the script in which Hindi is written. The script is shared by the Assamese and Manipuri languages also. The language had absorbed a large number of Arabic and Persian words along the way, but retains its essential Sanskrit base. The language is a soft and mellifluous one, and its vowels are pronounced through rounded lips.

The Bengalis of the province of Bengal were however, not a monolithic lot, but were vertically divided by religion. According to the 1941 census 53.4 per cent of the Bengalis were Muslims and the rest Hindus, with a minuscule proportion of Buddhists and Christians thrown in. The province was divided into five administrative divisions, which were further subdivided into districts, as follows : Presidency division, consisting of the districts of 24-Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Jessore and Khulna and the Presidency town of Calcutta ; Burdwan division, with the districts of Howrah, Hooghly, Midnapore, Bankura, Burdwan and Birbhum ; Rajshahi division, with the districts of Rajshahi, Pabna, Malda, Dinajpur, Bogra, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling ; Dacca division, with the districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Barisal and Mymensingh (the largest district in British India) ; and Chittagong division with the districts of Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Noakhali and Tipperah. Apart from these districts of Bengal, the people of Sylhet district of Assam, adjoining the Tipperah and Mymensingh districts of Bengal, those of the princely state of Cooch Behar adjoining Jalpaiguri and Rangpur, and a large number among the people of the princely state of Tripura, and among those of the districts of Manbhum and Singhbhum in Bihar also largely spoke Bangla, and therefore were Bengalis. A map of the erstwhile province of Bengal, as it existed till the midnight of 14th August 1947 is at Fig. 1. The Bangla-speaking areas outside Bengal are also shown in the same map.

M A P - F I G.1

There was a vague and unofficial division of the province into three parts : East, West and North. West included the Presidency and Burdwan divisions ; North, the Rajshahi division ; and East, the Dacca and Chittagong divisions. There were substantial differences in the geography and the culture of the three parts. The West, particularly Burdwan division, had no navigable rivers, and some parts of the division were semi-arid ; however, the division had very large reserves of coal in its Ranigunge coalfields which had sired a large number of heavy industries in the region, including an integrated steel plant at Burnpur. The North was bounded by two great rivers, Padma and Jamuna (different from the Jumna or Yamuna which flows by Delhi and Agra ; this Jamuna is the Bengali incarnation of the mighty Brahmaputra of Assam). The region was criss-crossed by a number of swift-flowing tributaries of the two rivers. The East, as opposed to the two, was a low-lying flood plain, being a delta created by three huge rivers : Ganga, a snow-fed river, rechristened after entering Bengal as Padma; Brahmaputra, ditto, Jamuna ; and Meghna, a short but wide river fed only by rain, but from some of the rainiest places in the world, including Cherrapunjee. Certainly the major rivers, and practically all their tributaries and distributaries were navigable right through the year. In fact the usual means of locomotion in British East Bengal used to be the country boat, the nouka.

By some quirk of demography, West Bengal was Hindu-majority while East and North Bengal were Muslim-majority. This is quite paradoxical, if one considers the balance between the two religions in the South Asian subcontinent. If one travelled from West to East along the vast land mass known as Indo-Gangetic plain (Aryavarta) in those pre-partition days, when there were some Hindus and some Muslims in every part of the plain, one would have observed that the proportion of Muslims in the population would go on reducing as one went east. Thus, the North-West Frontier Province, Baluchistan and Sind were overwhelmingly Muslim ; Punjab was balanced, with a Muslim majority tapering off as one went from Attock to Ambala, west to east within the province ; and the United Provinces and Bihar were overwhelmingly Hindu. Then how is it that suddenly the pattern reversed itself in East and North Bengal, and then again fell into place in the easternmost province of British India, namely Assam? This question had perplexed Syed Mujtabaa Ali[14] who had come to the conclusion that this was due to the arrival of Arab traders in the coastal towns of East Bengal, in the Chittagong-Barisal stretch who had settled down and brought and spread their faith in much the same way as they did in the Malabar region of present-day Kerala, or in Malaysia or Indonesia. Annada Sankar Ray[15] writes in his Jukto Bonger Sriti (Memoirs of United Bengal)[16]

that a tradition existed in Chittagong of writing Bangla in Arabic script. He attributes it to maritime trade relations between Chittagong and Arabia from the pre-Islamic period

maritime trade relations between Chittagong and Arabia from the pre-Islamic period.

The theory of Islam being spread by this trade-and-contact route, rather than by the conquest-and-conversion route, is plausible, and also attractive, but is probably not correct. Plausible, because a similar phenomenon was noticed in the case of a number of Portuguese who had settled down in those parts, and had created Roman Catholic pockets. Buddhadeb Bose[17] writes in the first part of his autobiography Amar Chhelebela (Bengali) that he had seen a person of almost pure Portuguese blood in the coastal town of Noakhali in the 1920s who spoke the usual Noakhali dialect. Gopal Haldar, in his reminiscences[18]

of pre-partition Noakhali mentions two villages adjoining Noakhali town called Shahebghata (literally, wharf of the Europeans) and Ezbelia (Isabella?), inhabited by ordinary-looking folk but of the Catholic faith, and with names like Gonsalves and Fernandes. This theory, on the other hand, is probably not correct, because firstly, it cannot explain how faraway places in North Bengal, such as Rangpur and Dinajpur became Muslim-majority, while places more accessible on the riverine route, such as Lower Assam, did not ; also why the Portuguese, who were no less proselytizers than the Arabs, could not spread their faith. Finally, the theory is probably not correct because there is a better explanation.

That explanation is that this region, along with large parts of the rest of India and places as far west and north as modern-day Afghanistan and Xinjiang, had become entirely Buddhist, and by the sixth century or so this Buddhism had also become adulterated with diverse forms of animism, occult practices, promiscuity, and the like, something in the nature of what is known in Hinduism as vamachara, and had degenerated into a loose faith. The great Acharya Sankara set out on foot from faraway Kerala to set right this state of affairs and in a life of only 32 years got the country firmly back to the Hindu fold. It is possible that the Acharya could not reach the eastern parts of Bengal because of the relative inaccessibility of the delta. In fact the delta of Eastern Bengal was known in legend as Pandavavarjita Desha -- the land that even the Pandavas avoided[19]

. The population therefore remained Buddhist-Animist, and easily converted to Islam when the marauders from the west came to Bengal. Extensive ruins of Buddhist monasteries are found at Paharpur and Mahasthangarh in the northern parts of present-day Bangladesh. The Buddhist priest Dipankar Srigyan had set out from a village called Bajrajogini near Dacca to convert the whole of Tibet to Buddhism. Till today Hindu Bengalis, when they choose to be abusive, refer to Muslims by the term Neray (a diminutive of Naraa, meaning shaven-headed). And a lot of Bengali Muslims do tonsure their heads, which is believed to be a custom inherited by them from the Buddhist viharas (monasteries) which their ancestors atttended. All these bear eloquent testimony to the hold of Buddhism in East Bengal.

Assam, on the other hand, remained Hindu and did not convert to Islam because of the preachings of the great Vaishnavite guru Shankara Deva (not the same as the sage of the same name from Kerala) who gave a firm faith within the Hindu fold to the Assamese. In

fact the Ahoms, who came from Thailand to settle in and rule Upper Assam, embraced Hinduism and remained Hindu.

The Muslims of East Bengal are therefore, in all probability, converts mostly from Buddhism-Animism and not from Hinduism. This view is also held by the eminent historian Vincent Smith[20]

, among others. The argument finds great support from the fact that Buddhism has yielded elsewhere, as it did in East Bengal, much more easily to Islam than Sanatan (Orthodox) Hinduism. Thus once-Buddhist Afghanistan and Xinjiang eventually became totally Muslim, while Hindu India did not. Similarly, Buddhist East Bengal became Muslim-majority, while lands to the west, which had become Hindu under the influence of Sankara remained Hindu.

Ashok Mitra[21] of the Indian Civil Service[22] has advanced a very different theory[23] which he attributes to his Gurus in Anthropology and Demography, respectively Jatindra Mohan Datta and Sailendra Nath Sengupta[24]

. According to him these two gentlemen worked out the total number of Muslims and Christians that had come to India from outside upto the 17th century. They then extrapolated this figure to 1951 using the prevailing rate of increase in population. Deducting the result from the total number of Muslims in India and Pakistan they came to the conclusion, among others, that ninety-five percent of the Bengali Muslims had been Hindus in the last, that is the nineteenth century. This is very interesting, but leads to a number of total absurdities. First, it is inconceivable that the number of Hindus converting to Islam would be more in the British age than in the Moghul or Nawabi age. There were several incentives to convert during those earlier ages, while there were only disincentives during the British times, at least upto the beginning of this century. Secondly any estimate of the total number of Muslims who entered India might be made, if at all, with some difficulty, but to estimate how many of them entered Bengal seems impossible. How they surmounted this obstacle is not mentioned in Ashok Mitra’s book. Thirdly, this theory does not explain the anomaly of sudden increase in Muslim population in East Bengal as one goes from West to East.. Lastly, it presupposes that the rate of growth of population is the same among Hindus and Muslims whereas in fact it is not so ; the latter was always more than the former. Ashok Mitra does not endorse the conclusions of his Gurus, but cites them without comment. Neither Syed Mujtabaa Ali nor Annada Sankar Ray are confident that their views are correct or even supported by a substantial historical school.

M.R.Akhtar Mukul, a prominent present-day Bangladeshi intellectual, has tried an explanation in his book 'Purbapurusher Sandhane' (in Bangla, meaning 'In Search of Our Ancestors') [25]. In this book also he has supported the contention that the Muslims of East and North Bengal are mostly converts from Buddhists. He has commented upon the absence of recorded history of Bengalis in the period between the decline of Buddhism in India and the coming of Sufi[26]

saints to Bengal. Finally he has also concluded that the simple appeal of the Sufis, who preached a form of Islam in which Allah, the Muslim God, was looked upon as an object of love rather than fear, proved to be irresistible to the massses of Eastern Bengal. These masses, according to him, were at the lower end of the caste spectrum under the Brahminical hierarchy, and were an oppressed lot. They eagerly embraced the egalitarianism of Islam, and that is how Eastern Bengal became Muslim majority.

While the theory is basically in tune with the likely theory postulated earlier, Mukul has not been explicit as to whether the masses first converted from Buddhism to Hinduism, and then to Islam or directly from Buddhism to Islam. His emphasis on the presumed Brahminical oppression suggests the first, while in all probability the second is what had actually happened. In his analysis as well as the interview that this author had with him (see Chapter 10) Mukul had also betrayed a strong dislike for Hinduism, or what he calls the 'Brahminical religion'. From the the annihilation of Buddhism in the plains of India (which has been referred to earlier in connection with the travels of Acharya Sankara) he has conjectured that Buddhists were also annihilated all over India, without revealing any basis for such a presumption, and without taking any account of the fact that ruins of Buddhist shrines, like Mahasthangarh in North Bengal or Nalanda in Bihar, had existed through the Hindu period, to this day without being vandalised. And last of all, his theory does not explain why what happened in Eastern Bengal did not happen in western part of Bengal, Magadh or Mithila regions (now parts of the Indian state of Bihar) or Avadh, Tirhut, or Rohilkhand (now parts of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh) - after all the Sufis could not have reached Eastern Bengal without passing through these regions, and there is no reason why the Sufis would not have tried their proselytisation in these parts. What, then, is the reason why the people responded to the Sufis in Eastern Bengal while they did not do so in such large numbers in Western Bengal, Magadh, Mithila, Avadh or Rohilkhand? The only plausible reason appears to be the extremely tenacious hold of Sanatan Dharma, as opposed to the looseness of the Buddhist-animist faith.

It appears that the subject has not been adequately researched. It is doubtless a very interesting topic of demographic research but the results, whatever they may be, may cause trouble, which may explain the reluctance to research.

The pattern of population in pre-1947 Bengal was roughly as follows : the province had one huge city and its industrial-commercial hub, its capital Calcutta. The rest of the province was known as moffussil, a region generally looked down upon by the inhabitants of the big city. In this region there were a few minor towns, such as Dacca, Chittagong and Darjeeling, but the rest was predominantly rural. As already said, the western part of the province, including Calcutta, was Hindu-majority while the north and the east were predominantly Muslim. Even here there was an interesting pattern. The towns of even the east and the north, such as Dacca, Mymensingh, Chittagong, and Rajshahi, were all Hindu-dominated. Meghnad Saha[27]

in a speech before the Indian Parliament had said " . . . the city of Dacca, the biggest city in Eastern Pakistan, it had a population of 200,000 before partition. 70 per cent of it were

Hindus --- 140,000. They owned 80 percent of the houses there. . . . . I know it because I come from Dacca". The same position is stated by Annada Sankar Ray. The countryside on the other hand, was overwhelmingly Muslim.

Bhabatosh Dutt[28]

writes of the vibrant life the Hindus had in the pre-partition East Bengal towns. "In Daulatpur (a small town in Khulna district where he spent a part of his boyhood) a great attraction for us boys was the 'Boikali' or 'Thakurer Shital', sweets and coconut milk distributed at the temple of Dadhivamana every evening during the month of Baisakh (mid-April to mid-May) . . . . College students used to celebrate Saraswati Puja with great pomp and pageantry, and used to decorate the temple with branches of trees and flowers". About Dacca, where he used to live in the suburb of Wari, he writes "Durga Puja was not celebrated in Dacca in public pandals as it is now done in Calcutta. We used to go to Moishundi, Sutrapur and the Ramakrishna Mission beyond Tikatuli to see Durga Puja. But the main puja in Vaishnavite Dacca was not Durga Puja but the famed Jhulan and Janmashtami processions taken out from Nawabpur and Islampur. The most memorable part of these two processions were the shong (clowns) that used to be at their heads and used to abuse each other". When he moved to Burdwan in West Bengal to teach at the Raj College in 1933 he found it a great comedown from the rich and vibrant cultural life of the towns of East Bengal.

The Hindus of East Bengal were great promoters of education. Every major town in East Bengal could boast of a school or a college founded by private charity of Hindus. After partition the names of these institutions were not changed, but simply abbreviated, with the result that the names of their founders were virtually lost. Thus, Brajamohan College of Barisal, Anandamohan College of Mymensingh and Murarichand College of Sylhet respectively became faceless, meaningless, B.M. College, A.M. College and M.C. College.

The land tenancy system in British Bengal was the familiar Zamindari system established by the 'Permanent Settlement' of Lord Cornwallis, whereby land revenue was to be collected from cultivators or ryots by Zamindars or Landlords, and deposited with the district collector by sunset on a particular day, failing which the right to the Zamindari would lapse, and the entire fief of the Zamindar would be put to auction. Later the system was further formalised by enactment of the Bengal Tenancy Act. Most, though by no means all, of the Zamindars even in the east and the north were Hindus, and the major Zamindars, whether Hindu or Muslim, were among the most respected members of their respective communities. Some of these Zamindars, such as those of Dacca or Burdwan, were big enough to be called Nawab or Maharajah, depending on whether they were Muslim or Hindu respectively.

In terms of occupation and distribution of wealth there was great imbalance. While there were a substantial number of Muslim Zamindars, the professions and the lower echelons of the civil services were overwhelmingly Hindu (the higher echelons were largely British) and that too confined to three higher castes of Brahmin, Kayastha, and Baidya. The Probashi magazine in the 1930s, a respected Bengali monthly of those days,

published a survey which showed that it was in only two occupations out of some twenty-odd that Muslim outnumbered Hindus : the common cultivator and the beggar. Thus there was a distinct middle class among the Hindus, but only the rich and the poor among the Muslims.

Now who was responsible for the majority community, namely the Muslims, being so far backward compared to the Hindus? Certainly not the Hindus, although that is an impression cleverly sought to be created by a section of post-partition Hindus as a part of the delusional exercise. The fact of the matter was (here we are talking about the all-India position) that the Muslims, upon being overthrown by the British from the power that they had enjoyed during the last seven hundred years or so, chose to withdraw into a collective cocoon, and doggedly refused to accept western thoughts. The Hindus, on the other hand, with their tradition of plurality of culture, eagerly embraced what was given to them by way of western culture by the British – both the good and the bad. As a result, when the British wanted to recruit Indians to man the lower ranks of the burgeoning bureaucracy, for which a rudimentary knowledge of the English language was essential, only Hindus were available. There were some exceptions to this rule, such as Sir Syed Ahmed's establishing of the Aligarh Muslim University, but by and large Muslim leaders advocated a retrogressive path and encouraged all believers to shun western thoughts.

Was the position in Bengal any different than this all-India picture? It appears that it was, in some respects at least. It appears that the Bengali Muslim was slightly ashamed to be Bengali. The Bengali Muslim spoke Muslim Bangla, which differed slightly (in those days) from standard Bangla in the large number of Arabic and Persian words thrown in. This is not to say that standard Bangla did not have Arabic and Persian words. It had many, but Muslim Bangla had quite a few more, particularly in regard to salutations and familial relationships, and in fields that had anything to do with religion. One tell-tale word is the word for water, which to all Bengali Hindus is Jol, and to all Bengali Muslims is Pani. Both variants of the language was replete with Arabic and Persian words such as Ain-Kanoon (Law), Purdah (Curtain), Munshi (Clerk). A Hindu meeting another would greet him by saying Namoshkar, and would address a younger person in a letter as Kalyanieshu, while a Muslim would say Salaam Alaiqum and Doabareshu under similar situations. To a Hindu one's mother's sister would be called Mashi, father's sister Pishi, and elder sister's husband Jamaibabu, while to a Muslim they would respectively be called Khala, Fufa and Dulhabhai. However the schism between the two variants of the language was not such that one community could not understand the other.

The Bengali Muslim in those days was embarrassed of the fact that he spoke Bangla, and not Urdu which was the written language of all Muslims of the Aryavarta, the entire stretch of North India from Bihar to the Northwest frontier, and the written and spoken language of the Muslims of the United Provinces. Part of the reason for the embarrassment was the fact that Bangla, even the Muslim variant, has its foundations solidly in the Indian classical language Sanskrit, and is written in a typical North Indian script closely related to Devnagri (in which Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi and Nepali are

written), and is therefore essentially Hindu. Urdu, on the other hand, is actually Persian words put in Hindi grammar (quite like Yiddish, which is Hebrew words into German grammar, and Afrikaans, Bantu words into Dutch grammar) and written in the Qoranic or Arabic script, and is, therefore, considered essentially Muslim. In his inimitable work of humour in Bangla Birinchi Baba, Rajshekhar Bose[29] writes of a humble Muslim coachman Bachhiraddi, who hailed from Faridpur (a small town in East Bengal in the district of the same name). Bachhiraddi claimed that his real name was "Mredam Khan" (an imposing but improbable name), and he was not really from Faridpur but from "Arabia (also known as Turkh), where everyone wore Lungis[30]

and spoke Urdu" (an absurd statement). In this ridiculous, confused and pathetic statement of an illiterate coachman lay the shame of being a Bengali Muslim of those days. This shame was further accentuated by the horizontal division of Bengali Muslim society into Ashraf and Atrap, which has been described later in this chapter.

Rafiuddin Ahmed, a Bengali Muslim himself, is even more forthright. In his short but important work 'The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 : A Quest for Identity' he writes "A dominant feature of the nineteenth-century Islamisation was the attempted rejection of virtually all that was Bengali in the life of a Muslim as being incompatible with the ideas and principles of Islam. The preachers' conception of Islamic polity was based on a vague notion of Middle Eastern values, and it was their dream so to transform the lives of the ordinary Muslims that they conformed exclusively to this trans-Indian pattern"[31]

. This is actually in keeping with the conflicts that Islam has engendered among the converted peoples, something observed with astounding clarity by the famous author Sir Vidia S. Naipaul (see Chapter 11 for a complete quotation).

The language problem of the Bengali Muslims sometimes gave rise to strange results. Annada Sankar Ray writes of the electoral contest between the patrician Urdu-speaking Khwaja Nazimuddin[32] and the plebian Bangla dialect-speaking Fazlul Haq [33]

. Khwaja Nazimuddin, according to Annada Sankar, spoke atrocious Bangla, and just for that reason lost to Fazlul Haq despite having the backing of the powerful governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson.

The two communities stood strictly parallel and separate like the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. There was very limited interaction between the two at the social level . There were said to be some exceptions, notably in Sylhet, probably as a result of higher literacy there among Muslims. This author had heard from her mother that when her family were the tenants of a Muslim houseowner in Sylhet town, one of the wives of the houseowner was a regular visitor to their house. Nirad C. Chaudhuri[34] observed in his 'Autobiography of an Unknown Indian' that in his childhood he found Hindu society to be indifferent to Muslims, but as early as in 1907 hostilities developed, and there was talk of attacks by Muslims upon Hindus at Kishorganj and Kalikachchha[35]. Among the economically stronger and the culturally more thriving Hindus, even touching a Muslim was considered sinful, to be washed away with cowdung and holy water from the River

Ganga (following the exodus of Hindus from East Bengal, the apologists for the Muslims have tried to explain that mass rape, murder and mayhem was just punishment for such behaviour). To a Muslim a Hindu was an infidel, a non-believer who indulged in the hateful practice of idolatry, and also economically an exploiter and oppressor. Beef, which the Muslims ate with gusto, was the embodiment of everything sinful to the Hindus, because it involved killing of the cow which the Hindus considered to be their mother. Both communities ate goat meat, but the Hindu had to have the goat slaughtered by severing the head from the body in one chop, while the Muslim had to have it Halal, a process in which the throat of the goat is slit and it is left to die bleeding. To the Hindu the Muslim was mlechchha or Jobon (Yavan), Neray, to the Muslim the Hindu was kafer, na-pak, malaun (all derogatory terms, like Nigger, Kike, or Polack in the United States, used to denote Americans of African, Jewish or Polish ancestry)[36]

.

Chaudhuri further describes[37] his own revelations later in life, when he was surprised to find that he himself, in spite of having come from deep inside Muslim-majority East Bengal, had only limited knowledge of their society. He recalls an encounter with rural Muslim clerics, whom he calls 'the very set of men who were the most active promoters of Muslim group-consciousness'. This was when he was the secretary to Sarat Chandra Bose[38], elder brother of Subhas Chandra Bose[39], and the president of the Congress in Bengal in the late thirties, and the Congress was trying to carry out a 'Mass Contact Movement' in order to endear itself to the Muslim masses of Bengal. He describes the encounter thus : "One day I saw a procession of Muslim divines trooping into Sarat babu's[40]

house. I was quite familiar with the modern Muslim dress, but had no idea that these learned Muslims wore different clothes. They did, for they had green gowns on and big turbans on their heads. . . . . even at Kishorganj in my young days I had never seen such figures. Their faces were grave, even stern. One face struck me very forcibly. It was pinched and peevish, but of an incredible ferocity. The eyes were large, black and burning, and in that emaciated face they looked even blacker and larger. His parrot-green gown, too was more resplendent than the others, but being of very cheap satin looked garish. He looked like an ill-dressed Robespierre, the sea-green Incorruptible. . . ."

It almost appeared that whenever the two communities showed any signs of coming closer, somebody or other rose to prise them apart. Titu Meer, a Muslim chieftain who won some fame in the 1830s trying to resist British troops from a fortress built of bamboos, went around teaching Muslims to have Arabic names, grow four-finger-long beards, and wear lungis instead of dhotis so that they would stand apart from the Hindus. Apparently not all Muslims listened to him then – Annada Sankar Ray mentions that as late as in 1937 he had found Muslim gentlemen wearing dhotis in Kushtia, a town in present-day Bangladesh. This is unheard of today in Bangladesh and extremely rare in West Bengal. Moulana Akram Khan, a converted Hindu Brahmin, editor of a Bangla magazine called Mohammadi, tried to doctor standard Bangla spelling so as to give it a Muslim flavour.

This is not to say that there was none who tried to bring the two communities together, only that they were too feeble, too few and too far between. It must be said that because of the basic plurality of the Hindu religion such persons were more numerous among the Hindus, although there were quite a few Muslims too. One such person was the poet Rabindranath Tagore who was also a medium-sized Zamindar. Almost all the cultivators in his Zamindaries of Patisar and Shahzadpur were Muslim. It was he who, upon his taking over as Zamindar, abolished segregation in the seating arrangements at official functions. He had said, in his inaugural address to his tenantry, that the Sheikhs (meaning Muslims, which was synonymous in the context with the poor cultivators) have to be saved from the clutches of the Sahas (meaning the Hindu moneylending class). On the political front the Congress party, and Fazlul Haq's Krishak Proja Party, though generally identified with Hindus and Muslims respectively, tried to preach amity, however half-heartedly or ineffectively, between the communities, while the Muslim League was unabashedly anti-Hindu. The Hindu Mahasabha[41]

, led by Syama Prasad Mookerjee was a pro-Hindu party, but did not preach anti-Muslimism in any way (following independence it had been an irresistible temptation for the Nehruvian-secularist and negationist writers to equate Hindu Mahasabha with the Muslim League – more on this subject later).

There were a handful of Muslims in the field of literature and education who tried their best in this respect. Syed Mujtabaa Ali has already been mentioned. The poet Kazi Nazrul Islam,[42] the Hindusthani classical music maestro Alauddin Khan, the educationists Kazi Abdul Wadud and Rezaul Karim, the publisher Abdul Aziz Al-Aman and many others – all of them tried to preach brotherhood and amity in their own way. One notable figure in this regard was S.Wajed Ali[43]. One of his very poignant stories describes his wonderment when, after returning to a neighbourhood he had lived in many years ago, he heard a grocer reading the Ramayana to his son exactly the same way (he described it as a Snake-charmer's voice) he heard it many years ago. His comment was "The same tradition carries on, unbroken". In his Collection of Essays one finds a rare clarity of vision, an unusual catholicity of outlook. He does not mince words in attacking the religious bigots known as 'Kathmollahs', the purdah system, the vitriolic attack by the fundamentalists upon the Hindus, even the belief that to attain salvation there is no other way but to embrace Islam[44]

.

Although the fields of education, art and culture was dominated by the Hindus, and the backwardness of the Muslims was manifest, yet when a rare Muslim attained prominence in these fields the Hindus did not grudge them appreciation. Abul Mansur Ahmad, a prominent politician of the pre-independence and East Pakistan era and later a Cabinet Minister in Pakistan's Central Government led by H.S.Suhrawardy, (more on this gentleman in Chapter 3 onwards) recalled the period of his teaching at National School at Mymensingh in the 1920s. During this period he used to sport a beard, and wear a Lungi and a cap, and yet his high caste Hindu students would touch his feet when they met him on the streets - such was his popularity as a teacher. Abul Mansur Ahmad was

also full of praise for a number of Hindu gentlemen in high stations for their catholicity of outlook. He mentions a tour by Jatindra Narayan Acharya Chaudhuri, Zamindar of Muktagachha (a very important Zamindari) to his village when he was only a boy. News of Abul Mansur's precocity (he had spoken insolently to the Zamindar's manager, because that manager had spoken similarly to Mansur's father and uncle) had reached the Zamindar's ears, and the Zamindar sent for him. Abul however refused to go - an unimaginable offence in those days, and remarked that the Zamindar could come to him if he wished to. The Zamindar was however vastly amused at this, and compared Mansur to the Hindu God Krishna, who as a boy had slain his uncle, the tyrant king Kangsa of Mathura. Abul Mansur Ahmad mentions a number of similar instances in which his daring but rightful stand was vindicated by his Hindu superiors through their sense of justice and fair play[45]

.

The sad part of the story is that people like Syed Mujtabaa Ali, Kazi Nazrul Islam Alauddin Khan, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Rezaul Karim, Abdul Aziz Al-Aman, S.Wajed Ali and Abul Mansur Ahmad were not the rule but the exception. A hundred of these well-meaning Muslim intellectuals were not equal to one fire-breathing Moulvi who could inflame passions among the faithful and against the infidels.

The mistrust that existed between the communities was bad enough, but it was fanned to the maximum extent possible by the British in pursuance of their ‘divide and rule’ policy. The activities of people like Sir Bamfylde Fuller, sometime governor of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, have been described in the next chapter which will give some idea of the misdeeds of the British in this field. However the picture that historians in the post-independence Nehruvian-secularist and negationist era mentioned above have tried to draw – that the two communities were living in perfect friendship and harmony till the big bad wolf, namely the British, landed among them, is just a lot of wishful thinking, and probably worse. Equally unrealistic is their overemphasis on the existence of certain deities (such as Bonbibi of the Sundarbans, Satyapir, etc.) worshipped by both communities, and of certain minuscule in-between communities, such as Baul, Kortabhoja, Sahebdhoni and others.

A caveat must be entered at this stage. Because the two communities in Bengal grew and functioned separately or did not trust each other does not necessarily mean that the relation between the two were always hostile. In fact for most of the time it was neither friendly nor hostile – which is normal among men who mind their own businesses. However, and this is a very important however, it was possible to inflame communal passions among Muslims in the name of their religion very easily, and this was done very frequently. This was anything but easy among Hindus. The reason for this difference is twofold. Firstly, because of traditions and the no-alternative nature of Islam – Islam was spread by conquest, whereas Hinduism was spread by assimilation ; and also if one were a Muslim one believed in the teachings of the religion all the way – unlike in Hinduism, there are no grey areas. And secondly worship for Muslims being a community affair, and a religious compulsion five times every day at the local mosque, it was easy to

address a large number, especially on Fridays, without making any special arrangements. It was this logistical advantage and this forum that were unabashedly made use of by the Hindu-baiting politicians, which ultimately resulted in the Hindus having to leave East Bengal.

As if this vertical division was not bad enough, both societies were further stratified horizontally, and that too in not one but two ways, that is socially and economically. The bane of Hindu society, caste distinctions, were the basis of the social division in that society. At the very top were the three upper castes, Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya, followed by the intermediate castes such as Baishya Saha, Mahishya, Aguri etc., and finally at the bottom the lower castes such as Kaibarta, Napit, Dhopa, Bagdi, Hari, Dom etc.. An impression has gained ground that Bengali Muslims are a completely homogeneous lot but that is very far from the truth. Although practically all Hanafi Sunnis, the entire Muslim society was horizontally divided (and probably still is, if the writer Syed Mustafa Siraz[46] is to be believed) between Ashraf (people who claim, rightly or wrongly, Afghan, Turkish, Persian or at least Northwest Indian ancestry) and Atrap (Muslims who are unadulterated Bengalis)[47]

. Upper-caste converted Hindus also tried, and often succeeded in getting themselves classified as Ashraf. The names used for the corresponding groups in Northern India are, respectively, Sharif and Ajlaf or Arzal. There were, and still are, other vague and regional caste distinctions among the Bengali Muslims, such as Gerosti, Badia, Jola (Julaha), Sheikh, Syed, Moghul, Pathan, Khondokar, Nikiri, etc. There are separate mosques for the different groups in many villages, and marriage across some of the caste barriers are very rare. Needless to say, the Ashraf are the upper caste. Some of them look down upon the Atrap to such an extent as to use for them the extremely derogatory term, Pati Neray – in fact an Ashraf Muslim minister of post-partition West Bengal used to use it for an Atrap colleague. This was the reason for Rajshekhar Bose's poor Atrap Bachhiraddi's claim that he was not a Bengali from Faridpur, but from Arabia (and therefore Ashraf), where everyone spoke Urdu!

As for the economic division, Hindu society had three tiers : Borolok (literally 'big' or rich men), Moddhobitto Bhodrolok (literally 'middle class gentlemen'), and Chhotolok or Baaje Lok (literally small, or insignificant men). Zamindars have already been described. They formed bulk of the rich or Borolok class. Apart from the Zamindars there was also a small, but very powerful group of big businessmen and industrialists (such as Sir R. N. Mookerjee[48] of Martin Burn fame, the Ship Chandlers and Stevedores of Calcutta Port, etc.), Barristers[49]

, and ICS men among the rich Hindu Bengalis. Although the term 'Bhodrolok' included the rich, it was especially reserved for the substantial middle class of Hindu Bengalis, the source of its literature, art, science and culture. These Bhodrolok were largely a salaried class doing clerical work at different tiers with the Government and the British 'Merchant Offices', but there was a fair number of professionals, mostly teachers, doctors and lawyers, among them. This salaried-professional bias was so strong in this community that small businessmen were actually looked down upon, and considered not quite

Bhodrolok. The nouveau riche among them had a special name, Naboshakh. The rest, encompassing artisans, cultivators, blue-collar workers and the lot were lumped into the chhotolok or baaje lok category.

The Bhodrolok class was a fairly talented lot, and the Bengali intellectual giants born in the nineteenth century practically all came from this class, though there were quite a few from the Borolok class also. Raja Rammohun Roy, the social reformer who abolished sutee or widow-burning and established the Brahmo Samaj (a monotheistic faith in a formless God within the Hindu fold, founded on the Upanishads), and the great Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore were both from the Borolok class. The rest – the social reformer and educationist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the freedom fighters Surendra Nath Banerjee, C. R. Das, J. M. Sengupta, the seer Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the religious reformer Swami Vivekananda, the novelist and composer of the Vande Mataram Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the educationist Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the scientists Sir J.C. Bose Sir P.C. Ray and S. N. Bose – to name only a few, were all born to this class. All these gentlemen were fairly evenly divided between East and West Bengal. There were quite a few ladies too, such a the poets Aru and Taru Dutt, Kamini Roy, prosewriters Sukhalata Rao, Seeta Devi, Shanta Devi, Maitreyee Devi, the doctor Kadambini Ganguly, and others. The 'Nightingale of India', Sarojini Naidu (nee Chattopadhyay), distinguished poetess and politician, was also a full-blooded Bengali, though she was educated in Urdu at Hyderabad, and wrote in English.

As opposed to this picture of Hindu society, there was no middle class worth the name among the Muslims. There were the Zamindars like the Nawabs of Dacca or Comilla, rolling in wealth and luxury ; and there was the ryot or chashi, the common cultivator, living from hand to mouth. There were relatively few barristers, advocates or doctors, and practically no major entrepreneurs among Bengali Muslims. Even among non-Bengali Muslims operating in Bengal the only significant name was Ispahani[50]

. The number of white collar Muslims working for the government, though not totally insignificant, was much smaller than that of Hindus, primarily because of lack of English education. As for private service, except for enterprises owned by their co-religionists such as Ispahani, their number was very small.

Similarly, the number of leading intellectuals among the Bengali Muslims was very much smaller than that among the Hindu Bhadralok. The novelist Meer Mosharruff Hossain, the educationist Haji Mohammed Mohsin, the essayist Kazi Abdul Wadud, poets Kazi Nazrul Islam, Bande Ali Mian, Ghulam Mustafa, Jasimuddin, S.Wajed Ali and, of course, Syed Mujtabaa Ali mentioned earlier, are worthy of special note. Unlike among the Hindu intellectuals mentioned, there was not a single religious reformer among the Bengali Muslims. Likewise, there were very few intellectuals among their women. Jahanara Chaudhuri and Sakhawat Begum may be mentioned as exceptions.

This was the general picture. For most of the time peace prevailed among the two communities but sometimes the peace got a little uneasy. Occasional hostilities were

reported, generally beginning with some insignificant event, such as catcalling or beating of drums within the hearing of a mosque or the teasing of some young girl of the other community. Each one of these quickly escalated into a communal riot which was promptly taken advantage of by the lumpen until put down by the police. Dacca town had become notorious for almost annual riots, probably because the two communities were more or less evenly balanced. They often used to take place in the wake of the once-famous Janmashtami processions of Dacca, when the drum-beating by the Hindus supposedly disturbed the Muslims at their prayers in their mosques. The victims of the riots were invariably innocent people who had happened to be in the wrong locality at the wrong moment. The usual crimes committed in the course of these riots were torching and other destruction of property, stabbing, a few murders ; and of course, almost invariably, rape and brutalisation of Hindu women.

Still, nobody thought of leaving home or migrating. The landscape of East Bengal, with its incredibly green paddy and jute fields and its wide, wide rivers, beels and haors (depressions in which huge water bodies were created by the monsoon rains) stretching away to the horizon, the beat of the Dhak at Durga Puja time, the lilting tunes of Bhaoaiya and Jaari Gaan (folk music), had been indelibly etched into the hearts of the East Bengal Hindu. This was his Desh, his Baari, his very own native land. Except for the few directly affected by them, the riots were considered mere irritants by the vast multitude of Hindus in East Bengal. They merely served to heighten the mistrust between the two communities. Nobody, almost without exception, among the twelve-million-strong Hindu community of East Bengal realised what sort of a powder keg they were sitting upon. Until 1946 and the Noakhali carnage.

CHAPTER 1

[1] Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) Poet of extraordinary profundity, founder of Visva-Bharati University, first Indian Nobel Laureate (Literature, 1913) for his English translation of his own Gitanjali (Song Offerings) in Bangla, one of the best-known Indians the world over.

[2]

Chandrasekhara Venkata Raman (1888-1970) Second Indian Nobel Laureate (Physics, 1930) for discovery of Raman Effect in the molecular scattering of light.

[3]

Hargobind Khorana (b.1922) Indian-born U.S. geneticist. Nobel Laureate (Medicine/Physiology, 1968)

[4]

Subramanyam Chandrasekhar (1910-1995) Indian-born U.S. astrophysicist. Nobel Laureate (Physics, 1983)

[5]

Amartya Sen (b. 1933) last Indian Nobel Laureate (Economics, 1998) famous for his Welfare Economics and his study of famines

[6]

Mother Teresa ((nee Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu) (1910-1997), Albanian-born Indian Catholic nun who founded the Missionaries of Charity at Calcutta. Nobel Laureate (Peace, 1979).

[7]

Swami Vivekananda (nee Narendra Nath Datta)(1863-1902) Hindu sanyasin or monk, disciple of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, founder of the Ramakrishna Math (monastery) and Mission and the Ramakrishna order of monks, who won world acclaim from his address at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, 1893 and practically singlehandedly introduced the profundity of Hinduism to the western world. He restored the self-confidence of the Hindus in the face of European political dominance

[8]

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (or Chattopadhyaya) (1838-1894) also called Rishi Bankim, one of the greatest prosewriters in Bangla, author of such classics as Kapalkundala, Ananadamath, Debi Chaudhurani, and many more, and of course of the immortal Vande Mataram, which in Sanskrit means 'Hail Mother(land)'. The song is partly in Sanskrit and partly Bangla. The song had provided inspiration not only to the freedom fighters of Bengal who had chosen the path of violence, but also to the mainstream freedom movement in India under the aegis of the Congress. The song had been given the status of an associate National Anthem in India after independence, but only the Sanskrit part, because it was considered that the Bangla part refers to idol worship and might offend the Muslims. Subsequently Indian secularists have gone one step ahead and started decrying the whole song on the supposed ground that it is anti-minority. However the whole song still continues to inspire patriotism in a multitude of Indians, including minorities.

[9] Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose) (1872-1950), Revolutionary-turned-mystic and philosopher, considered a saint by many. Suspected of responsibility for terrorist acts in Bengal, he was arrested (1908) and prosecuted by the British but later acquitted. While in prison, he underwent a spiritual experience. When released, he abandoned politics,

renounced violence, and retired (1910) to the French possession of Pondicherry in southern India, where he studied Yoga, attracted a devoted group of disciples, and formed an ashram, or religious community, to further spiritual growth.
[10]

Jagadis Chandra Bose (1858-1937) Physicist, famed for his work on the measurement of very minute responses from plants to external stimuli which was developed upon later by Bio-Physicists, and on the quasi-optical properties of very short radio waves which made significant contributions to solid state physics.

[11]

Satyendra Nath Bose (1894-1974) Mathematician and Theoretical Physicist, known for his contributions to Statistical Mechanics in collaboration with Albert Einstein, known as Bose-Einstein Statistics. Postulated the existence of elementary particles called Bosons.

[12]

Rakhaldas Banerjee (1885-1930) Archaeologist extraordinary, associated with the discovery of the ruins of Moenjodaro (now in Sind, Pakistan), the cradle of the Indus Valley Civilisation.

[13] Radha Binode Pal, Jurist of international acclaim, Member, Tokyo Tribunal for the trial of Japanese war criminals after World War II.

[14]Syed Mujtabaa Ali (1904-1974) Eminent Bengali litterateur, scholar, linguist, alumnus of Santiniketan, disciple of Rabindranath Tagore. Ali, although an East Bengali Muslim, chose to live alone and die in India, while his family stayed on the other side of the border. Ali had spent considerable lengths of time in Germany (mainly doing research at Bonn and Heidelberg) in the days of the Weimar republic, and in Afghanistan during King Amanullah's modernisation drive and the subsequent fundamentalist revolt. His works (in Bangla) contain substantial chronicles of the periods. With proficiency in no less than eight languages (Bangla, English, German, French, Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit) and a smattering of quite a few more, widely travelled, and with his formidable erudition, Ali was one of the nearest things Bengal has had to a world citizen.

[15]

Annada Sankar Ray (b. 1909) A writer of distinction in Bangla, with contributions also to Oriya, is an ex-member of the Indian Civil Service. His observation here, as also elsewhere in this book, is from his Jukto Bonger Sriti (Memories of United Bengal), a small but important book published in 1989 containing autobiographical sketches of his

stay at various places in East Bengal while serving in the ICS. While possessed of considerable literary skill and power of observation, Ray, unfortunately suffers from total lack of objectivity and tends to lapse into a state full of sentimental wishful thinking whenever he gets down to analyse the subject of Hindu-Muslim relations. Not unpredictably, he has been lapped up by the Indian 'Secularists'.

[16]

Jukto Bonger Sriti (Memories of United Bengal) (Bangla), Mitra & Ghosh, Calcutta, 2nd Ed.1990, p. 61

[17]

Buddhadeb Bose, A Bengali poet and prosewriter of considerable distinction, spent his early life in Noakhali town and his college days in Dacca.

[18]

Noakhalir Mati o Manush (Bangla, The Soil and the People of Noakhali), Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sinha Ed., Gyan Prakashan, Calcutta,1st Ed., 1991, p.167

[19]

According to the epic Mahabharata, the five brothers Pandavas lost a game of dice with their cousins, the one hundred Kauravas, lost their kingdom and wandered all over India. There are very few parts of India that they did not visit. Pandavavarjita means areas so remote that even the Pandavas could not visit them.

[20]

Vincent A. Smith, The Oxford History of India, 4th Ed., 10th Impression 1992, p. 801

[21]

Ashok Mitra (1917-1999), a member of the Indian Civil Service, and an important Demographer, was the Census Commissioner of India. The quotations and references here are from his autobiography Tin Kuri Dosh (literally three score and ten in Bangla)in which he has recorded very detailed and astute observations. Although a self-confessed Communist sympathiser in his early days, there is remarkable objectivity in his remarks on the subjects. Important : He is not to be confused with the Economist of the same name who was the Finance Minister of West Bengal for some time and became famous for his remark "I am not a gentleman, I am a Communist"

[22]

Indian Civil Service (ICS) was a cadre of bureaucrats which formed the ‘steel frame of British administration in India’. People of this service, about a thousand in number of whom half were British and the other half Indian, manned all the key Government posts in British India. They were selected through a very rigorous process, and were very powerful, very handsomely paid, and considered above suspicion. A number of them have left their mark in fields quite unrelated to colonial administration. Writings of three of them, Annada Sankar Ray, Ashok Mitra and Hiranmay Banerjee, have been used extensively as source material in this book.

[23]

Tin Kuri Dosh (Three score and ten) (Bangla), Dey’s Publishing, Calcutta, Part II, 1st ed., 1993, p.106

[24]

Sailendra Nath Sengupta was the Deputy Director of the State Statistical Bureau, and Jatindra Mohan Datta an Advocate and an Encyclopaediac. Ashok Mitra was coached in the relevant subjects by them in 1949 when he took charge of Census Operations.

[25]

'Purbapurusher Sandhane' (In Search of Our Ancestors) (Bangla), Ononna, Dacca, 1st Ed., 2001

[26]

Sufis are a mystical sect of Muslims who believe that human life is like a journey (safar) in search of God, and the ultimate objective of the traveller is to attain that perfect knowledge of God (ma'rifah) which is diffused through all things. . . . the unprejudiced student of their system will observe that Tasawwuf or Sufism is but a Muslim adaptation of the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophers (Dictionary of Islam by Thomas Patrick Hughes, see Bibliography)

[27]

Meghnad Saha (1893-1956). An outstanding physicist, with original contributions to Astrophysics in his theory of Thermal Ionisation and its application to the Interpretation of Stellar Spectra. Saha hailed from Dacca city and moved to Calcutta after independence, and became one of the very few true champions the East Bengal

refugees had ever known. He was elected to the Lok Sabha (Lower House), of the Indian Parliament from North-West Calcutta on a congress ticket in 1952, and held that seat till his death in 1956. Saha also served for some time on India's Planning Commission.

[28]

Bhabatosh Dutt (1911-1997) celebrated professor of Economics of Presidency College, Calcutta, teacher of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, spent his boyhood in Daulatpur (District Khulna) and in Dacca, and has recorded his reminscences in his autobiographical sketch Aat Doshok (literally 'Eight Decades' in Bangla), Pratikshan Publications Private Ltd., Calcutta 1st Ed., 1988

[29]

Rajshekhar Bose (1880-1960) (pseudonym Parashuram) a Bengali humorist and litterateur with an unparalleled brand of very dry humour . Bose trained as a chemical technologist and held the top post in Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works, a pioneering Indian-owned venture, for many years. He also has to his credit a concise Bengali edition of the classic Mahabharata, and a Bengali dictionary, Chalantika.

[30]

A Lungi is a wraparound worn by men below the waist, usually of checquered cotton, similar to a Sarong of Indonesia. As opposed to this, a Dhoti is a much longer piece of cloth, also worn by men below the waist, but wrapped separately around the two legs, and the tail passed between them and tucked in at the back. In Bengal the former was a hallmark of Muslims, the latter of Hindus. Nowadays a lot of Hindus wear lungis, but very few Muslims in West Bengal wear dhotis, and none in Bangladesh. This terminology is peculiar to North India, especially Bengal, and does not apply to South India.

[31] The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 : A Quest for Identity, by Rafiuddin Ahmed, Oxford University Press, 2nd Ed., India Paperback 2nd Impression, p. 106

[32]

Khwaja (also Sir) Nazimuddin, a scion of the Nawab family of Dacca, whose ancestors had come from Kashmir as traders and settled down in Dacca, eventually to become major Zamindars big enough to be called Nawabs. The family spoke, and probably still do, only Urdu and not Bangla. Nazimuddin, a prominent Muslim League leader had been a minister in Fazlul Haque's coalition ministry of 1937, and Premier in the Muslim League ministry of 1943. He became the Prime Minister of Pakistan after the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan.

[33]

Abul Kashem Fazlul Haq (1873-1962) , also called Sher-e-Bangal (Tiger of Bengal),Premier of Bengal heading the Krishak Proja Party - Muslim League coalition in 1937-41, and the Progressive Democratic Coalition (also called the Shyama-Haq coalition) in 1941-43. Although supporting the Muslim League's Pakistan resolution in 1940, Haq was a rarity among Muslim politicians of Bengal of his time who could look upon Bengalis as Bengalis, and not as Hindus or Muslims. After partition he became the rallying point of all opponents of the League in erstwhile East Pakistan, and sailed to a landslide victory in 1954 as the head of a United Front to become the Chief Minister of East Pakistan. The next year he made a trip to Calcutta where he made a speech advocating the reunion of the two Bengals. On return he was deposed but was later rehabilitated and taken as a Minister in the Pakistan central cabinet of Chaudhry Muhammad Ali, and was made the Governor of East Pakistan in 1956.

[34]

Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999), centenarian, sometime secretary to political leader Sarat Chandra Bose, sometime broadcaster, and above all a prolific writer of nonfiction in Bangla and English. His celebrated works in English include Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, Continent of Circe, Thy hand, Great Anarch, and Clive of India. His writing is said to be coloured by his very strong Anglophilia (he had been living in Oxford for quite some time before his death) but is nevertheless very important. His great failing is said to be his tendency to show off his knowledge and erudition (which, however, were truly formidable). Excerpts from Chaudhuri in this book are from his Autobiography of an Unknown Indian and Thy Hand, Great Anarch.

[35]

Kishorganj is a subdivisional town in erstwhile Mymensingh district where Nirad C. Chaudhuri was born and spent his childhood. Kalikachchha is a village in the Brahmanbaria subdivision of erstwhile Tipperah district where Chaudhuri's mother came from. Coincidentally, this author's mother also came from the same village.

[36]

For a fuller and concurring view of the gap between the two religions in the subcontinent see 'Freedom at Midnight' by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, 1st Ed., Simon and Schuster, New York, 1975. pp. 36-42

[37]

Thy Hand, Great Anarch, 1st Ed., Chatto & Windus, London, 1987, p. 469

My Hand, Great Anarch, 1st Ed., Chatto & Windus, London, 1987. p. 109

[38]

Sarat Chandra Bose (1889-1950) a leading barrister of the Calcutta High Court, philanthropist, one of the foremost Congressites of undivided Bengal. Although Bose occupied a premier position in the politics of the province for a long time he could leave little impression owing to his lack of political foresight. He died a broken man after independence.

[39]

Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-?) known throughout India as ‘Netaji’ (The Leader), was indeed a leader with unbelievable charisma. His greatest achievements were all after he left the shores of India. Although he never had any formal military training, he organised out of British Indian POWs in Japanese camps in South-east Asia, the Indian National Army or Azad Hind Fauj, which fought the allied armies and along with the Japanese drove up from Burma (now Myanmar) to set foot on Indian soil at Mairang in Manipur on March 18, 1944. Meanwhile reverses were suffered by the Japanese, and severe strain on his supply lines forced him to retreat South and East. He was last seen at Taihoku, Taiwan, on August 19, 1945 boarding a plane. The official version is that shortly thereafter he died in a crash. This is not believed by many, and there are good reasons to think that he was taken prisoner by Russians somewhere in the Soviet Far East, and killed while in captivity. A bachelor till late in life, he married his secretary, the Austrian-born Emily Schenckl, before leaving Germany.

[40]

'Babu' (or Baboo) is a suffix attached to the first name of a Bengali Hindu gentleman. Bengali Muslims never use it. The term was formerly used also as prefix to the full name of such a gentleman, e.g. Babu Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya. The word eventually also came to mean 'a clerk' because a large number of Bengali Hindus used to work as clerks. The word is gradually going out of use now.

[41]

The Hindu Mahasabha was founded by Dr B.S.Moonje and was the principal party in British India to speak for Hindu interests, although the bulk of the Hindu support went to the Congress. It died a slow death after independence, and now exists only in name. Syama Prasad Mookerjee left this party in 1948 and formed the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951. The principal pro-Hindu party in today’s India, and the principal party in the ruling coalition now in 2000, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is descended from this Bharatiya Jana Sangh.

[42]

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), known as ‘Bidrohi Kobi’ (the rebel poet) was one of the most important Bengali Muslim litterateurs of all times. Born at Churulia, District Burdwan, West Bengal, Nazrul is famed for his fiery yet lyrical verse, his easy assimilation of Arabic and Persian words into Bangla, and his appeal cutting totally across religious lines. Nazrul preached Hindu-Muslim amity all his life, and is equally revered in present-day West Bengal and Bangladesh. He also fought in the First World War in Mesopotamia in the Bengali regiment. He spent the last years of his life as a vegetable, having been affected by an incurable brain disorder, and died in Dacca.

[43]

S.Wajed Ali (1890-1951), a West Bengali Muslim from a distinguished family from Hooghly, and a Barrister and writer. One of his sons is Ahmed Ali, the famous photographer, and Ahmed Ali's daughter is Nafisa Ali Sodhi, sometime swimming champion and film actress. Wajed Ali's writings show an astounding clarity of thought, and ought to receive more recognition in promoting Hindu-Muslim amity.

[44]

S. Wajed Ali Rochonaboli (Collection)(Bangla), Syed Akram Hussain Ed., 1st Ed., Bangla Academy, Dacca, Bangladesh, 1985

[45]

Amar Dekha Rajneetir Ponchas Bochhor (Fifty Years of Politics, as I saw it) (Bangla) by Abul Mansur Ahmad, 8th Ed., Khoshroz Kitab Mahal, Dacca, Bangladesh, 1999, see pp. 11, 19, 27, 29, 77.

[46]

Syed Mustafa Siraz, Contemporary powerful Bengali Muslim writer from Murshidabad, West Bengal. In Salma, a very poignant short story, he describes how the three Ashraf wives of the storyteller look down upon Salma, the fourth wife, who is Atrap.

[47]

Jukto Bonger Sriti, ibid. p. 9

[48]

Sir Rajendra Nath Mookerjee an outstanding industrialist who rose from a very humble and rural beginning to hold, under his Managing Agency Martin Burn Ltd., such giant and diverse industries as Indian Iron and Steel Co., Indian Standard Wagon Co., Burn & Co., Hooghly Docking and Engineering, several light railway companies, collieries, tea estates etc. As a pioneer among Indian industrialists he is considered in the same league as Sir Jamshetji Tata and Ghanshyam Das Birla, the founders of the house of Tatas and Birlas. Unfortunately, unlike the latter, his house failed to keep pace with the times and disintegrated when hit by a recession in the 1960s.

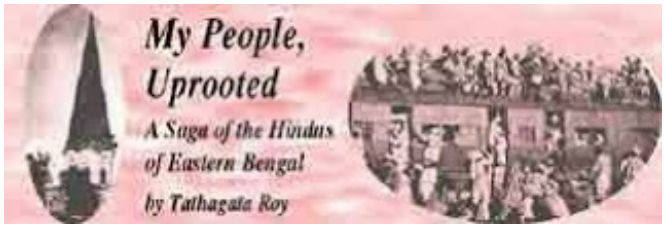
[49]

A Barrister is a lawyer who has been 'called to the bar' from one of the 'Inns of the Court' of London, and has to adhere to an ancient and strict code of conduct. There are four such inns, namely Lincoln's, Gray's, Inner Temple and Middle Temple. Bengal has had a long love affair with this institution and still sends a few boys and girls each year to London to get trained for this purpose. As opposed to Barristers, indigenously trained lawyers were put into different classes such as Advocates, Pleaders, Vakils, Mukhtars etc. All these distinctions have now been abolished in India.

[50] Mirza Abol Hasan Ispahani, Scion of wealthy one-time Calcutta commercial and financial empire, M.M.Ispahani Ltd., one of Jinnah's' closest personal friends in the party, a major backer and financier of the Muslim League. Ispahani's role in the purchase and distribution of rice during the great Bengal famine of 1943, made possible through the largesse of Suhrawardy, was a shameful chapter in the history of the province at the time. The Ispahani empire continues, now based in Karachi.

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-2-countdown-politics-of-bengal.html



Chapter 2

THE COUNTDOWN : POLITICS OF BENGAL BETWEEN THE TWO PARTITIONS, 1905-1947

It is neither possible nor intended to give even an overview of the politics of Bengal during this very eventful half-century. Volumes have been written on this period, and further volumes will continue to be written. However, it is impossible to understand the Hindu exodus from East Bengal without bearing in mind the political framework of the times and the major political events that took place during the period preceding partition of the province. After all, the exodus was a purely political phenomenon – neither religious nor economic. Religion was merely the human attribute exploited in this case by the relevant politicians, and the economic disaster that followed was the result, not the cause of the exodus. In fact economic factors had nothing whatsoever to do with this particular brand of persecution --- Muslim Ashraf and Atrap combined without qualms to drive out Hindu zamindar, pleader, artisan, fisherman and cultivator.

First of all, an explanation as to why the period 1905-1947 has been chosen is called for. 1905 was the year of the first partition of Bengal, an event of very far-reaching political significance. In between there was the politically watershed year of 1920. This was about the time when problems between Hindu and Muslim in undivided India began to take on serious proportions. This was also, coincidentally, the year when Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi made a serious entry into the politics of India with his non-cooperation movement. This was also the year Lokamanya Balgangadhar Tilak died. The ‘problems between Hindu and Muslim’ referred to are basically communal riots between Hindu and Muslim, of which Bengal had more than its fair share. 1947, on the other hand was the year of India’s independence and Bengal’s second partition, the year in which atrocities against Hindus in erstwhile East Pakistan began with overt or covert state sponsorship, and gradually took on the form of another holocaust.

Such state-sponsored atrocities against Hindus have not stopped even after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. They have merely taken on a much more covert form, which is really a case of bad habits dying hard. The year 1992 had seen unspeakable horrors against Hindus once again, in the wake of demolition of a disused mosque built on the birthplace of the legendary Lord Rama at Ayodhya in India. It was this particular set of atrocities that prompted the tigress from Mymensingh, a frail

Muslim woman doctor called Taslima Nasrin, to come out with her unforgettable volume Lojja (Shame) that truly marked a watershed in this otherwise drab landscape. More on Taslima and Lojja later.

To start, take a brief look at 1905. Lord Curzon had been appointed the Governor-General and Viceroy of India in December 1898, and served in that post till 1905. He was not known for his fondness of Indians, and was even less fond of Bengali Hindus in particular. Before leaving he delivered a parting kick to the province in the form of the first partition of Bengal. According to his scheme the existing Bengal Presidency (which at that time included the present states of Bihar and Orissa) was divided into two parts. The western part, comprising the Presidency and Burdwan divisions together with Bihar, Chhota Nagpur and Orissa would form the rump Bengal. The eastern part would be joined with Assam, to be known as the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. This scheme was hatched by him much earlier, and he toured the province to garner support for the same, helped by his able lieutenant Sir Bamfylde Fuller. Sir Bamfylde then became the governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, with its capital at Dacca. Their main selling point for the scheme was that it would fetch for the Muslims a province in which they would be in majority and would not have to play second fiddle to the Hindus. Predictably, they got the support of a number of Muslim landowners of East Bengal, among them Salimullah, the influential Nawab of Dacca. Sir Bamfylde had gone one step ahead of his boss in his salesmanship. Bengali folklore is replete with stories of a king who had two queens – Suo Rani, the great favourite, on whom the king lavished love and gifts, and Duo Rani, the neglected, cast-aside one. Sir Bamfylde used to publicly proclaim[1]

that for him the Hindu was the Duo Rani, and the Muslim Suo Rani.

The partition had been done with the clear objective of breaking the back of the Bengali Hindu, and currying favour with the Muslims. There was widespread opposition to it from all Hindus and a significant number of Muslims, but Lord Curzon remained stuck to it saying that it was a ‘settled fact’. Among the prominent people who publicly opposed the partition were the poets Rabindra Nath Tagore, Rajani Kanta Sen, Kaliprosonno Kavyavisharad, Dwijendra Lal Roy ; assorted public men and men of letters such as Surendra Nath Banerjea, Ramendra Sundar Tribedi, Bipin Chandra Paul, Suresh Chandra Samajpati, Monoranjan Guha Thakurta, and many others. However the number of prominent Bengali Muslims who opposed the partition was very heartening. They included the Barrister Abdul Rasul, Moulavi Abul Qasem, Abul Hossain, Dedar Bux, Deen Mohammed, Abdul Ghafoor Siddiqui, Liaqat Hossain, Ismail Shirazi, Abdul Halim Ghaznavi, and others. Aqatullah, younger brother of Salimullah, the Nawab of Dacca, was a very prominent protester. This list of prominent Muslims is quite interesting, because never again in the politics of Bengal – divided or undivided – would Hindus and Muslims join hands in such large numbers on any issue.

The period between 1905 and 1920 was a period of disquiet for the whole of the subcontinent. There were the Morley-Minto administrative reforms in 1910, the repeal of the partition of Bengal in 1911, and moving the capital of British India from Calcutta to

Delhi with the inauguration of New Delhi in the same year with a royal visit. Meanwhile armed rebellion as an expression of nationalism gained ground in Bengal. The first man to be sent to the gallows in 1909, a young man called Khudiram Bose, was followed by countless others. The first world war was waged in 1914, and continued upto 1918. Two young Bengali Hindu revolutionaries, Jatindra Nath Mukherjee and Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya collaborated with the German consul at Shanghai, and planned to import two shiploads of armaments and land them at Raimangal in the Sundarbans and at Balasore in Orissa. The plan did not work out. Jatindra Nath Mukherjee, also known as Bagha (Tiger) Jatin, was killed in a gun battle with the police at Balasore. Bhattacharyya escaped abroad, changed his name to Manabendra Nath Roy (better known as M.N. Roy) and became an associate of Lenin during and after the Russian revolution. A British army officer called Dyer in 1919 opened fire upon a peaceful gathering in a square at Amritsar in Punjab and killed 1516 people in cold blood. Rabindra Nath Tagore renounced his Knighthood in protest.

Meanwhile the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were introduced in India in 1919 and ushered in a period of Dyarchy. In this system the total range of activities of the government was divided into two groups. One group was called 'Reserved' and contained the more important and critical departments, such as Revenue, Police and the Judiciary. These were kept exclusively in British hands. The other group, called 'Transferred' comprising the less critical departments, such as Health, Local Government, Education, etc. were put to a limited extent in Indian hands, but with such safeguards that the British retained the power of ultimate decision even on these subjects.

It was around this time that the country started getting polarised around the two principal parties of the country, the Congress and the Muslim League. The Congress, founded in 1885 by a retired British ICS man Allan Octavian Hume as a platform for dialogue between the elite among the Indians and the British quickly changed itself into a forum of anti-British Indians of differing intensities. Although there was no religious bias to the party to begin with, Muslims were lukewarm about the party from day one. Vincent Smith, an eminent historian writes[2]

: "The Muslims in general watched the growth of the Congress from a distance and stood aloof from its controversies with Lord Curzon. But having allowed it to become dominantly Hindu in character through their abstention, they took alarm at the first sign of concessions to its demands. From this sprang the deputation to Lord Minto in 1906, led by the Agha Khan, which demanded separate electorates for Muslims in any representative system that might be introduced."

The Muslim League, founded in 1906 by Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, also changed its character. It was originally conceived as a political organ of the Muslim landowning class. However in 1913 a very urbane, very anglicised, and anything-but-a-devout-Muslim barrister from Bombay called M. A. Jinnah joined the League. He had joined the Congress in 1906, and joined the League while still with the Congress. He was born in Karachi in 1876 as Mahomet Ali Jheenabhai among a Shi'ite Muslim sect called Khoja Ismaili who, curiously enough, are governed by Hindu personal laws. Under his leadership the

League gradually became the rallying point of all Indian Muslims who wanted to be different from Hindus in as many ways as possible. The Congress however continued to persist in the illusion that it was for Hindus and Muslims alike. This illusion, as we shall see, persists to this day, and was one of the factors that brought untold misery to the subject of this book, the East Bengali Hindus.

At this stage a brief digression on the subject of M.A.Jinnah would be in order. What sort of a person was this M.A.Jinnah who, as we all know now, brought about the political division of the subcontinent, the creation of a state called Pakistan, the greatest migration in history, the great Calcutta killings, and needless misery to countless people of India, largely because of, and by the force of his enormous ego? A man who is worshipped as the Qaid-e-Azam, and hated for the vivisection of the country, depending on which side of the political and religious divide one is on, could not have been an ordinary person. Some of the best insights into his character are available from the autobiography of his onetime junior in the legal profession, M.C.Chagla[3]

.

According to Chagla, Jinnah around 1920 was a completely irreligious person who never prayed, never visited a mosque, and was very fond of ham sandwiches and pork sausages, food absolutely prohibited by his religion Islam. Chagla describes him as the uncrowned king of Bombay, idolized by the youth for his sturdy nationalism. How did such a person become the narrow sectarian leader that we know him to be? Chagla holds two factors to be primarily responsible. First, wherever he was, he had to be the leader, and he saw no chance of this with the Congress being in the total grip of Gandhi[4]. Second, his personal life : he had married Ruttie, a Parsee Zoroastrian girl many years his junior, daughter of his friend Sir Dinshaw Petit. It was an incompatible match, and had resulted in an unhappy marriage, but Jinnah truly loved her. Ruttie was an avid nationalist, and a good influence on Jinnah, politically speaking. Ruttie died early, and after that Jinnah's only companion at home was his unmarried sister Fatima who was as communal-minded as Ruttie was liberal. Chagla has specifically remarked that she enjoyed Jinnah's diatribes against the Hindus, and if anything, injected an extra dose of venom into them[5]

. What followed, of course, is history.

Now to return to the state of the country : the times around 1920 was extremely eventful in many other ways, such as Gandhi’s protest against the exploitation of indigo farmers in Champaran, Bihar, followed by the same against the infamous Rowlatt Act, and finally the launch of his non-cooperation movement ; the end to transportation of Indian ‘indentured labour’ to Mauritius, the West Indies, Fiji, and South Africa ; and many others. However, two events particularly relevant to the subject of this book took place at this time. The first was Jinnah’s severing ties with the Congress following serious differences between him and Gandhi with regard to the latter’s non-cooperation movement. The second took place not in India, but in faraway Sevres in France on 14th May, 1920. It was the publication of the terms of a treaty proposed by the British with

the Turkish Sultan. His Ottoman empire had fought on the side of the Germans in the war, and was therefore dismembered. The European part of the empire came under the administration of a commission. The Arab Asian part – comprising the Arabian peninsula, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia (later Iraq) went to Britain and France, under the garb of League of Nations mandates. Only Asia Minor (present Turkey) remained directly with the Sultan. Till the Sultan acceded to these terms his empire would remain under the direct control of the allies.

Now apart from being the ruler of Turkey the Sultan, having had temporal jurisdiction over Mecca, was also, ex officio the Caliph or Khalifa, the temporal head of pan-Islam. The Muslims of India, or the fundamentalists among them at any rate, were therefore quite agitated over this political emasculation of the Sultan and started a political movement which came to be known as the Khilafat movement. The Indian National Congress under Gandhi allied itself completely and wholeheartedly to this movement.

Gandhi's intention behind doing this was obviously to involve the Muslims in the struggle for independence and thereby forge some kind of a united front against the British. Gandhi, unlike his successor Jawaharlal Nehru, was deeply aware of the basic religiosity of Indians[6]

and therefore considered Khilafat to be an ideal channel for reaching his objectives. The British, on the other hand, were counting on the deep schism between the two communities and were quite disturbed about the designs of Gandhi. Lord Reading, the Viceroy of India, wrote to Lord Montagu, the Secretary of State for India pressing him to alter the terms of the Sevres treaty, with a view to placate the Muslims of India. Meanwhile Mustapha Kemal Pasha came to power in Turkey. He was wedded to the idea of modernising and secularising Turkey. He replaced Arabic alphabets by Roman ones in writing the Turkish language, abolished the purdah (wearing a veil) system for women and made it illegal to wear the Fez, the red conical tasseled cap that had become the hallmark of the Muslim in the early part of the twentieth century. As one of the first steps towards this modernisation and secularisation he abolished the Caliphate, and the Khilafat movement in India died out.

In the wake of the Khilafat movement, however, other things were happening in India. On the Malabar coast,[7] the northernmost part of the present-day state of Kerala, in August 1921, a group of Muslims of Arab descent known as the Moplahs started agitating against the British. Their rebellion, however, quickly took an abject anti-Hindu turn. The official estimate of deaths, practically all Hindus in this Muslim-majority area, was as much as 2,339. There was widespread forcible conversion of Hindus and desecration as well as destruction of Hindu temples. Some three years later, in September 1924, terrible anti-Hindu riots broke out at Kohat in the North-West Frontier Province. Desecration and destruction of Hindu temples also took place in Amethi in the United Provinces and Gulbarga in Bombay Presidency. The year 1926 saw as many as thirty-five Hindu-Muslim riots in the country. In the riots in Bombay city that took place in 1929 several hundreds died. Out of these the Moplah massacre and the Kohat riots were total anti-Hindu pogroms. The Congress, however, made only a few feeble noises against

the Moplah massacre. In respect of the Kohat riots Gandhi started a fast – a hunger-strike actually – at the residence of Moulana Mohammed Ali[8]

in Delhi in order to foster goodwill between the two communities and continued for twenty-one days. These riots marked the beginning of the communal rioting that would plague the subcontinent for the remainder of the century.

Gandhi's unstinted support for the Khilafat movement, however well-intentioned it might have been, together with the feeble reaction of the Congress to the anti-Hindu pogroms of Malabar and Kohat, were terrible mistakes, because they sent all kinds of wrong (and presumably unintended) signals to past and potential anti-Hindu rioters. The first and most important signal received by the Muslims was that the Hindu-dominated Congress would henceforth, so long as Gandhi was in charge, bend over backwards in any given situation to please the Muslims. That trait had already been shown in Gandhi's participating in a sectarian, retrogressive movement like the Khilafat to reinstall a temporal religious leader many thousands of miles away with whom no Indian Muslim should have had any reason to have any business.

M.C.Chagla, who has been mentioned earlier in connection with the personality of Jinnah, has roundly criticised Gandhi's participation in the Khilafat movement. In his autobiography he writes "I have always felt that Gandhiji was wrong in trying to bring about Hindu-Muslim unity by supporting the cause of the Khilafat. Such unity was built on shifting sands. So long as the religious cause survived, the unity was there; but once that cause was removed the unity showed its weakness. All the Khilafatis who had been attracted to the Congress came out in their true colours, that is as more devoted to their religion than to their country". In Chagla's view it was the Muslim League under the leadership of Jinnah which was then the party of patriotic, secular, modernised Muslims, and the Congress should have allied itself with the League[9]

.

The second unfortunate signal sent by Gandhi's alliance with the Khilafatis was that, provided a sufficiently large number could be incited to participate in an anti-Hindu riot, nothing much would happen either to the riot inciters or to a mob. Most certainly the Congress would not, repeat not, ask for punishment for the guilty, because that would amount to committing two sins : first, showing that they were prepared to take up cudgels on behalf of Hindus, and therefore could not be said to be equitable towards Muslims ; and second, obliquely admitting that the British alone could keep peace among Hindus and Muslims.

The Congress's usual reaction to any anti-Hindu riot henceforth would be a mild and inane statement, calling for cessation of all hostilities and restoration of peace and goodwill between the two communities. The worst that could happen following an anti-Hindu riot was that Gandhi himself would come down to the spot of the riot, and appeal for universal peace, hold prayer meetings, or go on fast. Not a breath about bringing the guilty to book. Then some Muslim leader somewhere would make some gesture to make

Gandhi break his fast, such as by promising that they would henceforth use their good offices to prevent further rioting. Then Gandhi would break his fast, and the next few days would be all Bhai-Bhai (we are all brothers), until the next riot. Meanwhile the rioters would have had their fun of torching, looting, killing and of course, raping. All in the name of a holy war upon infidels.

This view is supported by as ardent a Nehru-admirer as Ashok Mitra who could not help feeling regret at the fact that even after the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946 (see Chapter 3) neither Nehru nor Gandhi saw it fit to visit Calcutta[10]

. Mitra could attribute this only to the fear that any such visit immediately following the killings (in which, according to Mitra, the guilt of the Muslims was many times that of the Hindus) might result in their being dubbed anti-Muslim. Thus, (conclusion author's, not Mitra's) the right or wrong of the situation was of no consequence. What mattered to the leaders, including the Mahatma, was that they should under no account risk being called anti-Muslim.

An anti-Muslim riot was another matter. Then the Congress and the Muslim League would vie with each other to get tough with the rioters. Thus, during the Noakhali carnage (see Chapter 3 for details) where Hindus were butchered, their women raped and brutalised by the hundreds, and families forcibly converted to Islam by the villageful, all that Jawaharlal Nehru did was to meekly follow Gandhi from village to village. What Gandhi did in his turn was to visit villages once inhabited by Hindus with the message that they should come back to their homes. Or rather what had once been their homes, and were now charred remains thereof. But during the Bihar riots that followed in retaliation, where Hindu killed Muslim, the selfsame Jawaharlal Nehru seriously suggested that the Royal Indian Air Force should be brought in to strafe Hindu villages[11]

, and Gandhi of course threatened a fast unto death.

These signals had a profound influence on the turn of events in the province of Bengal. Here, first, the Muslims were in the majority. Secondly, they could be inflamed much more easily in the name of waging a Jihad, holy war. Thirdly the logistics of inflaming passions among Muslims existed in the form of their prayer meetings five times a day. And now they were being told that an occasional deviation would result, at worst, in yet another fast by Gandhi. The inevitable result followed. The increasing number of Muslims flocking to the Muslim League felt emboldened beyond belief. With one party among the two principal ones in the country being their very own, and the other trying to placate and appease them in every conceivable way, the future was surely theirs.

In the midst of all these the communities were fast becoming so clearly divided as to make any talk about 'common interest' increasingly an absurdity. The fringe of Muslims with the Congress, who were called 'Nationalist Muslims' at that time, was constantly dwindling. Meanwhile M.A.Jinnah had returned to India from Britain to be elected the 'Permanent President' of the Muslim League and the Muslim League had become

synonymous with this one man. By and large the Hindus and Muslims looked up respectively to the Congress and the Muslim League as their own parties, and to Gandhi and Jinnah as their supreme leaders. There were a few exceptions to this rule. Chaudhri Khaliquzzaman of the United Provinces was one, but eventually he yielded to pressure and joined Jinnah in 1937. Another, Allah Baksh of Sind, was assassinated. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan of the North-West Frontier, also known as the Frontier Gandhi, leader of the Red-shirted Khudai Khidmatgar (who were a voluntary organisation rather than a political party) remained close to but separate from the Congress. Only the Unionist Party in Punjab, and the Krishak Proja Party in Bengal held out as strong, self-willed, mainstream Muslim political parties distinct from the League. The former was a party which represented rural, as opposed to urban, interests in Punjab, and was led by Mian (later Sir) Fazli Hussain, followed by Sir Sikandar Hyat Khan, and Khizr Hyat Tiwana. This party cut across religious lines, and had among its leaders Lala (later Sir) Chotu Ram, representing Hindu Jat agricultural interests and a number of leaders from among Sikh agriculturists. The latter was led by A. K. Fazlul Haq and represented Muslim agriculturists while the Muslim League in Bengal belonged to the Muslim elite, namely the Zamindar class. More about this party later in this chapter.

The sensible thing under such circumstances for the Congress would have been to ally with these parties, who had credible and sober Muslim leaders, so as to draw Muslims away from the rabidly communal Muslim League. Yet the Congress continued to persist in the illusion that they alone represented Hindus and Muslims alike, and in order to reinforce their own faith in it were prepared to do anything – anything at all - to please the Muslims. This did not hurt Hindus from the provinces where they were in an overwhelming majority, such as Bombay Presidency, Madras Presidency or the Central Provinces and Berar. This did not hurt the Punjabi Hindus or Sikhs either, because of the presence of the Unionist Party described above ; nor the Hindus in the North-West Frontier Province because Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, very close to the Congress, held sway there. This did not even hurt the Hindus in the United Provinces or Bihar because, in spite of the substantial Muslim minority being solidly behind the League, the majority was still with the Hindus. On the other hand it hurt the Bengali Hindus like none else, because there was no one here to save them from the tyranny of the Muslim League except the Congress, and that party would do nothing to help the Hindus for fear of being dubbed communal. The one slim ray of hope that existed with Fazlul Haq's Krishak Proja Party was adequately taken care of by the Congress's remaining equidistant from them and the League, followed by a most regrettable and pigheaded refusal in 1937 to make a coalition with them.

In such a state Round Table Conferences – some three rounds of them – were held in London among the various concerned parties, namely the British, the Congress the Muslim League and diverse other groups. Nothing much came out of them. In 1932 Ramsay Macdonald, the Labourite Prime Minister announced his 'Communal Award'. This award fixed communal representations in the provinces and was given its final shape by the Poona Pact of 4th September 1932 which secured general as well as special representations for the scheduled or depressed classes. This was followed finally by a

mammoth piece of legislation known as the Government of India Act 1935, which received royal assent on 4th August 1935. Vincent Smith describes it as “the last major constructive achievement of the British in India”.

What did the 1935 act do? In short, it enlarged the scope of popular representation subject to the paramountcy of the British. It put an end to the Dyarchy of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms and introduced the federal principle with the corollary of provincial autonomy and the principle of popular responsible government in the provinces. Muslim-majority Sind was separated from Bombay Presidency (which had an overall Hindu majority) to form a separate province. A new province of Orissa was formed from the Orissa Division of the former province of Bihar and Orissa and the adjacent portions of Madras Presidency and Central Provinces. Burma was completely separated from India, and a separate act called the Government of Burma Act was re-enacted in the very next session of the British Parliament.

Provincial elections took place in February 1937 and resulted in striking Congress successes in the Hindu-majority provinces. The Muslim League did well only among Muslims in the Hindu-majority provinces. The Congress, conversely, drew practically a blank among the Muslims. Of the 836 non-Muslim seats that the Congress contested they won as many as 715 ; but of the 485 Muslim seats they contested 85 and won only 26. The Muslim League won only two out of the 86 Muslim seats in the Punjab, 40 out of 119 in Bengal, and none at all in Sind and the North-West Frontier. Thus, very ironically, the Muslim League made a very poor showing in the land mass that is today known as Pakistan.

Two things happened in these elections which made rift between the Congress and the Muslim League irreparable -- and in effect strengthened the position of the Muslim League. The first happened in the United Provinces where the Congress and Muslim League had contested the seats on an understanding that there would be a coalition if they won. This was termed ‘independent cooperation’ by Jinnah and was adopted not just in U.P. but also in all Hindu-majority provinces. Jinnah went on to declare “There is really no substantial difference between the League and the Congress . . . . we shall always be glad to cooperate with the Congress in their constructive programmes”.

When the results came out it was found that the Congress had won a majority of its own in seven out of the eleven provinces. As a result the Congress went back on its understanding. Jawaharlal Nehru declared, with historic shortsightedness, that everybody else will have to ‘simply fall in line’ with the Congress. This actually reinforced Jinnah’s oft-taken position that however much they talked about cutting across religious lines, the Congress could not be trusted to look after the interests of the Muslims. Maulana Azad has termed this action of Jawaharlal a blunder equal to the one he made nine years later on July 10, 1946 when, by a thoughtless remark at a press conference, he gave an opportunity to Jinnah to wriggle out of the League’s reluctant acceptance of the Cabinet Mission proposals (see later in the chapter).

Bhabani Prosad Chatterjee, in his well researched “Deshbibhag : Poshchat o Nepottho Kahini” (in Bangla, meaning “The Partition : the Background and what happened behind the scene [12]) has commented that had
the Congress obliged the League by accommodating them in the United Provinces, the Hindus would surely have accused them of appeasing the League[13]

. It is difficult to accept this position. Chatterjee has not mentioned who among the Hindus would have made this accusation. Only the Hindu Mahasabha would have done it, and they did it even otherwise, not without any justification. In truth the reason lay in the Congress’s eternal grand delusion : that they, and they alone, represented all castes and communities through the length and breadth of India.

The second incident took place in Bengal. Here, three parties emerged, with none being able to secure a majority. Fazlul Haq’s Krishak Proja Party, representing the interests of Muslim agriculturists secured most of the seats reserved for the Muslims, but that was not sufficient for him to form a ministry. Haq himself was deeply suspicious of the Muslim League, and wanted to have no truck with them. A number of prominent members of the party, though devout Muslims, were nationalistically inclined, and wanted a coalition with the Hindu-dominated Congress. The Congress however remained stuck in a totally inflexible position, which later proved disastrous, that they would rather sit in the opposition but would not enter into any coalition. Fazlul Haq thus was driven into a coalition with the Muslim League and is said to have remarked, in so many words, that he had been thrown to the wolves. An understanding was reached between him and the Muslim League leaders Suhrawardy[14] and Nazimuddin through the good offices of a Bengali Hindu Industrialist called Nalini Ranjan Sarker[15] and the Coalition Ministry took office in late 1937. Suhrawardy and Nazimuddin had, until the previous year, belonged to a party known as the United Muslim Party which merged with Jinnah’s Muslim League through the efforts of Ispahani and a few others[16]

.

This refusal of the Congress to form a coalition with Fazlul Haq has already been termed pigheaded, and was the result of a decision of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) who refused to make an exception in the case of Bengal. This was probably the first nail to be driven in the coffin of the East Bengali Hindus, though very few realised it as such at that time. Nor was it a result of following some inflexible principle, because the selfsame AICC permitted such a coalition in Assam. Now why did the AICC do it? Was it an act of simple political stupidity that occasionally occurs in the life of every nation and moulds the destiny of millions? Or was it something deeper, an act of spitefulness? And if the AICC did it why didn’t the Bengal Congress raise their voice against such a decision, and in favour of coalition with Haq? Perhaps we shall never know. However we can look at observations of contemporary watchers and try to reach our own conclusions.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri, as the secretary of the Bengal Congress president Sarat Chandra Bose, had the opportunity of observing the situation at very close range. It is generally acknowledged that his objectivity, astuteness, and power of observation could not be

seriously faulted if the British were not concerned. He has said[17]

: “I am unable to say whether the treatment of Bengal by the Congress was deliberate. But there is no doubt that there was indifference to Bengal in the Congress, if not some real antipathy, which, in spite of being only latent, influenced policies. . . . . Here I have only to add that at that early stage even Sarat Bose showed lack of foresight by being opposed to office acceptance”.

These were all momentous events, the Communal Award of 1932, the Government of India Act 1935 and the taking office of Fazlul Haq’s coalition ministry in 1937. What did they mean for Bengal, or more precisely, Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims ?

Again, Nirad C. Chaudhuri had spoken about these with remarkable clarity. He has this to say[18] : “Let me begin with the political situation in the strict sense. The starkly obvious feature was that, under the provincial constitution imposed on Bengal by the Government of India Act 1935, Bengali Hindus were permanently debarred (italics his) from exercising any political power in their province . . . . . except through the charity of the Muslims which was not likely to be bestowed. . . . . they were reduced to a permanent statutory minority, disenfranchised as to power, although given the franchise to elect members to the legislature”. It ought to be mentioned that this situation continued till the partition of the province (except for the brief interregnum of Fazlul Haq’s ministry, 1941-43) till the province was partitioned and Hindu-majority West Bengal came into being. Chaudhuri also wrote[19]

in the then popular Bengali monthly Sanibarer Chithi in September 1936 “ Today, as a result of the Communal Award of 1932, there is going to be a dominance of Muslims, as against the Hindus, over the governance of Bengal. . . . . They (the Bengali Hindus) are apprehensive that as soon as the Muslims get political power they would, in education as in literature, undermine the very culture based on ancient Indian ideals which was the pride of the Bengali Hindu. The fear is neither baseless nor unjustified. . . .” (Translation his).

Meanwhile there were legislative and economic changes which bettered the lot of the Muslim peasant. The Bengal Tenancy Act, the legislation forming the framework of the Zamindari system, underwent two amendments, all in favour of the ryot, the tenant peasant, most of whom in Eastern Bengal were Muslim. Jute prices also registered a steep upward movement around this time, and jute cultivators were almost all Muslim. This economic empowerment had an immediate political fallout. Muslims began to increasingly occupy posts of Presidents (who were hitherto mostly Hindu) of Union Boards, the lowest rung in the system then prevalent of Local Self-Government.

In the meantime, while the Congress was proceeding on the Gandhian path, and the Muslim League was busy trying to wrest as much as possible for the Muslims, a different kind of movement was in full swing in Bengal. This was the movement of those who had chosen the path of violence to freedom. They were confined largely to Bengal, and to

some extent to Punjab and the Maharashtra region of the Bombay Presidency. The British used to call them terrorists, but in Bengal they were known as Biplobi or Revolutionaries. Their epoch was Bengal's Ognijug or Agniyuga, the era of fire.

Normally when one talks of Revolutionaries one almost automatically thinks of Marxists or Communists, but these people had nothing to do with Marxism. In fact the Marxists or Communists had played a very underhand and nefarious role in India's freedom movement – more on this subject later. The inspiration for the movement came from a variety of sources – mainly from the patriotic song Vande Mataram composed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, and to the part of the Hindu scriptures known as Bhagavad Gita, which is actually a collection of the counsel that Lord Shri Krishna gave to the warrior Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

This phase of India's struggle for freedom actually began in the early years of the century, led by a brilliant person called Aurobindo Ghosh who had qualified for the ICS, but failed the test of riding a horse. He eventually left the movement for a life of spiritualism, and came to be known as Sri Aurobindo of Pondicherry. The movement did not have any central control, as a result of which it ebbed and flowed with varying strength at various points of time. Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki were among the first to take shots at the British. Khudiram's death by hanging and Prafulla's in a gunfight provided inspiration for hundreds of others. During the First World War some of the revolutionaries tried to collaborate with the Germans – the efforts of Bagha Jatin in this regard have also been referred to earlier.

It is not that the Revolutionaries did not have any organisation at all, merely that they had no central organisation, planning, coordination or control. In fact they used to operate under the loose control of a number of organisations spread throughout the province, especially East Bengal. One very important such organisation was the Anushilan Samiti which had more than five hundred branches in East Bengal. Among the others were Jugantar Dal, Attonnati Samiti, Sri Sangha, Prabartak Sangha and others. A high point in the Revolutionary movement was reached on 18th April 1930 when a group of very ordinary middle-class Bengali Hindu Bhadralok, having formed themselves into an organisation called the Indian Republican Army (doubtless under inspiration from their Irish counterparts), led by a schoolteacher called Shurjo Sen, also known as Masterda, raided the district armoury at Chittagong and cut off Chittagong from the rest of the world by simultaneously ransacking the telegraph office. Most of the group perished in the gunfights that followed, but Masterda, with his associate Tarakeshwar Dastidar were captured, tried and hanged. Their bodies were not allowed to be cremated for fear of unrest. Instead they were secretly thrown into the sea. Some others, such as a young intrepid woman called Pritilata Ohdedar, chose to commit suicide. Meanwhile a number of Indian and British police officers, such as Ellison of Comilla, Asatullah and Tarini Mukherjee were shot dead by other revolutionaries. The same year saw a gun-battle on the corridors of Writers' Buildings in Calcutta, the seat of the Bengal

Government, where three young men called Binoy Basu, Badal Gupta and Dinesh Gupta shot dead Simpson and Craig, two very senior police officers, and were themselves killed or subsequently hanged.

There were similar revolutionaries following the path of armed insurrection in other provinces too, notably in Punjab and in the Maharashtra part of Bombay Presidency. In fact the first among such revolutionaries to go to the gallows were the Chapekar brothers of Poona (now Pune). However, the preponderance of Bengal in this phase of the struggle for freedom is brought out by nothing else as clearly as the walls of the cellular jail at Port Blair, Andaman Islands. In the British days the Indian Penal Code prescribed the punishment of 'transportation for life' for certain offences, and that meant moving to the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, which were penal colonies just as French Guiana and Devil's Island were to the French. This practice was abolished after independence, and the cellular jail today stands as a national monument. Now, the cellular jail has the names of its inmates inscribed on the walls, and has them classified province-wise – and out of the thirty-two walls where such names appear, as many as twenty-three carry those from Bengal.

Two points are to be noted. First, these revolutionaries were, to a man, all Hindus. Secondly, barring those from the district of Midnapore, practically all the rest were from East Bengal, many of them from the districts of Barisal, Dacca, Faridpur, Chittagong and Tipperah.

Because of the lack of a central control, of any definite gameplan, and more than anything else of leadership, the revolutionary movement petered out. But it had put the fear of God in the British and had mobilised a lot of fence-sitters to commit themselves totally to independence of the country. While popular perception has it that the mainstream Congress movement, following the path of non-violence under Gandhi, was primarily responsible for bringing independence to the country, this is not accepted by all. In fact it remains an enigma to this day as to what precisely prompted the Imperial British to give up the first slice, the brightest jewel, of their empire, and go home without a serious fight. It is widely believed that Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Azad Hind Fauj or Indian National Army, and the Naval Mutiny of 1946 had played at least as important a part as Gandhi's non-violent movements ; because these two caused the British to start doubting, for the second time since the War of Independence of 1857 (wrongly termed by some as the Sepoy Mutiny), the loyalty of their Indian troops. Along with these, the revolutionaries of Bengal and Punjab must have played a very important role too!

But that is not the end of the enigma. What happened to those among the fearless revolutionaries who survived, the majority of whom were Hindus from East Bengal? Very strangely, practically all of them left East Bengal after partition, hounded out by Muslims, without so much as a whimper. The enigma is, why did people, who had braved the imperial power of the British, succumb so meekly when challenged by the might of the much less powerful Pakistani state and their rag-tag Lungi-clad Muslim rioters? Why did

such people run away from places that were their homes for hundreds of years? This question has been rarely, if ever, asked. An answer to this question, and also why it is not asked, has been attempted in chapter 10 of this book.

All these surviving East Bengali Hindu revolutionaries lived on to become embittered, frustrated, disgruntled old men in the refugee colonies of post-partition West Bengal. Their exploits were largely forgotten in the media blitzkrieg launched by the Congressites in their self-praise and in praise of Gandhi and Nehru and their non-violent struggle. Their grandchildren born in post-partition West Bengal refused to believe that they did the kind of things they claimed they did. All that they got (in material terms) for risking their lives and then being hounded out of their homes, were commemorative copper plaques, pensions, some franchises from state-owned companies, and railway travel concessions. Quite a few among them became Communists. One or two took to crime, and one became an expert bank robber, of course with a revolutionary objective. Not one of them ever opened his mouth against their being ousted from East Bengal.

We can now return to the mainstream independence movement. The next milestone in Bengal politics was the exit of Subhas Chandra Bose from the Congress in 1939, followed by his exit from the country in 1941.

It happened this way : In 1938 Subhas Chandra Bose was a brilliant young man of only forty, with great personal charm and magnetism. He was the younger brother of Sarat Chandra Bose, President of the Congress in Bengal, which gave him considerable political pedigree as well as clout. He had just come back from a long sojourn in Europe where he had gone for medical treatment. He was a powerful speaker, of a very presentable appearance, a confirmed bachelor, of unimpeachable personal integrity and was totally untainted by any scandal. With all these he had acquired an irresistible appeal to the intelligentsia, and it was only natural that he should be considered for the highest political office that a Hindu in British India could aspire to – namely the presidency of the Indian National Congress. At that time the hold of Gandhi on the Congress was so complete that no one could think of reaching that office without his endorsement, and no one could think of continuing in that office without his support. Gandhi endorsed Subhas's candidature for the Congress to be held at Haripura in 1938, and Subhas was elected president.

The next three years in his life after this was an anticlimax. Immediately following his election problems started between the two of them. Unfortunately Subhas's skill at politicking was next to nothing compared to Gandhi's. Gandhi managed to get practically all the first-rung leaders of the Congress, such as Patel, Nehru, Kripalani, Bhulabhai Desai, Sarojini Naidu, Azad and others leagued up against Subhas. The time for electing the president for the next session, to be held at Tripuri, near Jabalpur, came, and Gandhi endorsed a quiet, if colourless, person called Pattabhi Sitaramayya for the post. An election was held. Such was Subhas's appeal that he got elected in spite of Gandhi's active opposition, and Gandhi promptly went on record saying that Pattabhi's defeat was his defeat. After this his camp made life miserable for Subhas, with the result that he was

forced to resign in exasperation, also leaving the Congress in the same motion, to found a new party called the Forward Bloc. This proved to be great political mistake on Subhas's part. In one stroke he had thrown himself out of the political mainstream of the nation. Even his brother Sarat Bose did not follow him, and remained with the Congress. After this, in January 1941, despite being under police surveillance, he escaped from his house and went to Nazi Germany, and thence by submarine to Japan. His greatest exploits all relate to the period after this exit, but the fact remains that with this he was lost to Bengal.

Subhas Chandra Bose was a natural, charismatic leader, and his exit from Bengal robbed the province of a person who could hold a brief for the province before any forum in the world. His appeal also ran across communal lines, and he had the capacity to persuade the Muslim majority of Bengal to take a rational line vis-a vis the Hindus. As already said, the Congress, despite being an overwhelmingly Hindu party, and existing because of Hindu support alone, was always reluctant to take up the cause of Hindus for fear of losing a Muslim support that wasn't there. Fortunately for the Hindus of Bengal, there rose above the political horizon, at this juncture, a leader of unmatched clarity of thinking, fearlessness and integrity. His name was Syama Prasad Mookerjee[20]

, and for the Bengali Hindus he was to prove to be their last hope in politics – although they did not realise it then, and have only begun to realise it after all these years.

Syama Prasad entered politics at the instance and insistence of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the president of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, who had then just been released from prison and had come to visit Bengal in August 1939. The Congress's pandering to Muslim interests in order to garner their votes, at the cost of Hindus who had kept the party in business, had thoroughly revolted Syama Prasad. He heard Savarkar's speech at the Hindu Mahasabha conference at Khulna and came in contact with him. Meanwhile other Mahasabha leaders, such as Ashutosh Lahiri, N.C.Chatterjee (father of Somnath Chatterjee, parliamentary leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the 1980s and 90s) had perceived the great promise of the man and were pressing him to join. Another person who was instrumental in finally persuading him to join the Mahasabha was Swami Pranavananda, founder of the Bharat Sevashram Sangha.

Another very important thing happened on September 1, 1939 in faraway Europe. Hitler's Wehrmacht invaded Poland, and Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister rose in the Parliament at Westminster to say, "Gentlemen, we are at war with Germany". As a British colony India was dragged into the war which was, till then, a purely European affair – even the United States of America had not joined it then. The Congress wanted an assurance from the British regarding India's independence after the war as a quid pro quo for India's joining the war, and the British government flatly refused. The Congress then resigned their ministries in all the seven provinces where they were in power. The British were not terribly hurt. But the happiest person was Muhammad Ali Jinnah who termed the day of such resignation as the 'day of deliverance for the Muslims'.

Meanwhile Fazlul Haq was having a very hard time with the Muslim League diehards. It was his dream to educate the illiterate masses of Bengal, and in spite of having been Premier he had selected for himself the portfolio of Education rather than the much more politically important Home or Finance portfolios, leaving these to the Muslim League. His politics was so fundamentally different from that of the communal zealots of the League that nobody expected them to stick together for any length of time. He had been more pressured than persuaded to support the Pakistan Resolution of 1940 at the Muslim League session at Lahore, much against his wishes as it turned out later. Finally in 1941, he decided that enough was enough, and after having a word with Syama Prasad, left the ministry which then collapsed. He then formed, in December 1941, the Progressive Coalition ministry with the Hindu Mahasabha, in which Syama Prasad became the Finance Minister. This was popularly known as the Syama-Haq ministry, and this was the last time over a long period that Bengali Hindus were going to get some justice from their government.

Despite the fact that the cabinet enjoyed the confidence of the Provincial Legislative Assembly, the Governor waited for a full week, from the 3rd to the 11th of December, before swearing the cabinet in. And before he did so, he dealt it a terrible blow. On the 11th, a few hours before the swearing-in, he got Sarat Chandra Bose arrested under the Defence of India Regulations, and incarcerated him in the Presidency Jail. The supporters of the Coalition were all aghast and advised Fazlul Haq not to swear the cabinet in. However this would have meant playing right into the hands of the British, and Haq did not do it. Instead he decided to get his cabinet in first, and then apply pressure on the Governor to release Bose. However, this design also failed. The Governor told Haq that this was a decision of the Central Government, and there was nothing he could do about Bose's arrest[21]

.

The real reason for such conduct was that the British hated the ministry. First, they were right through clearly partial to the Muslims, though not all of them were as brazen as Sir Bamfylde Fuller (see Chapter 1) about it. Secondly, their entire administrative strategy at the time rested, to a large extent, on quietly fomenting and exacerbating Hindu-Muslim tension, and the Progressive Coalition ministry was literally a monkey wrench into their works. This element in their administrative strategy was so basic that even Annada Sankar Ray, who is otherwise unduly mild towards the British even while criticising them in his Jukto Bonger Sriti, is very explicit on this score. He mentions a case where a Brahmin and a Muslim were arrested during the Civil Disobedience movement. The British District Magistrate released the Muslim immediately, telling him repeatedly that the British had no quarrel with the Muslims, but kept the Brahmin in lock-up for a week. Thus, Ray observes, it was rubbed into him that the Government does not desire amity between Hindu and Muslim[22]

. Thirdly they were even more partial to the Muslim League than they were to the Muslims, and could not take kindly to a ministry that had deposed them. The hatred was manifest from a telegram sent by Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy, to Amery, the Secretary of

State for India on the subject of unleashing repressive measures on the populace who had participated in the 'Quit India' movement (see below) : "Herbert (Sir John, the Governor of Bengal) is not very certain of the attitude of Haq, who, under Syama Prasad Mookerjee's influence shows signs of wobbling, with the result that the Bengal Government may be reluctant to take necessary action". So they looked for opportunities to dethrone this ministry and reinstall the Leaguers. Such opportunity was not late in coming, and the occasion was provided by the Congress's 'Quit India' call.

In fact the Hon'ble Sir John Arthur Herbert, Governor of Bengal, was a very complex character whose ideas nevertheless fell admirably in line with the Imperial designs of the British. He was known as 'Herbert the pervert' in intimate circles for some of his strange proclivities. He had also inherited the love of Muslims and hatred of Hindus from his predecessor of an earlier generation, Sir Bamfylde Fuller (q.v.). He set for himself a task of Muslimizing the Police forces and went about this in a very Machiavellian way.

For their own reasons the British had decided to have two parallel Police departments in their Presidencies. Thus, for Bengal there was Calcutta Police, with jurisdiction over Calcutta, and Bengal Police for the rest of Bengal. They were not just separate and independent departments but had totally different cultures. Calcutta Police was much more the glamorous of the two, with their smart white uniforms (as opposed to drab khaki of the moffusil), and the resplendent red turbans of their constables. Their headquarters, Lalbazar, was modeled after the Scotland Yard of London. The sergeant cadre of Calcutta Police in those days was manned almost exclusively by Anglo-Indians, generally known as Lalmukho (Red-faced) sergeants. However the sub-inspectors' cadre was manned largely by Indians, mostly Bengalis. Because of the glamour of the Calcutta Police and the fact that its officers were subject to transfer only within the city, a number of young men from good, aristocratic families of Calcutta were attracted to this cadre, and as a result most of the Officers-in-Charge of the Police Stations, who were of Inspectors' rank in the force, were Bengali Hindus.

Herbert created a number of functional departments in the Calcutta Police Headquarters, such as Criminal Records, Cheating, Murder and so on. He then imperceptibly drew away the Hindu Inspectors from the posts of Officers-in-Charge to head these departments and had them replaced by Muslims. As a result, by the time Suhrawardy was in position for the run-up to the Great Calcutta Killings (see Chapter 3), what are called 'Line Functions' in Management Science today, or 'Command postings' in the Army were entirely in the hands of Muslim officers. Quite a lot of Suhrawardy's work thus had already been done in advance by Herbert[23]

.

In August 1942, in its Bombay session, the Congress called upon the British to 'Quit India'. This is variously known as the "Quit India' movement, the August Kranti or Biplob (Uprising) and so on. As a movement it was not a well-planned or coordinated one. However, it was enough for the panic-stricken British to promptly put all the Congress leaders in jail. As a result the movement became a loose cannon and at places, one hell

of a cannon. One such place was the Midnapore district of Bengal, the home of such dissimilar characters as Khudiram and Suhrawardy. The district had earned great notoriety after the assassination of three of its District Magistrates – Douglas, Burge and Peddie – so much so that thereafter the government stopped sending Britishers to the district to become its magistrate.

In certain parts of the district, notably in the Tamluk and Contai subdivisions, total independence was proclaimed. The areas were cut off from the rest of India by uprooting railway lines and severing telegraph connections. The British retaliated with brutally repressive measures, deploying both the police and the military who absolutely took the law in their own hands. They made few arrests. Instead they killed, burnt, tortured, maimed and raped, all with a carte blanche issued by governor Herbert.

At this juncture a terrible cyclone, accompanied by tidal waves, hit the Midnapore coast in the very same Tamluk and Contai subdivisions. This was on October 16, on Ashtami day of the Durga Puja, the biggest festival of Bengali Hindus, and the streets were full of people in Contai town. In no time the town went under five feet of water. This was a time of the year when no cyclone is normally expected, and the population was taken totally unawares. Ashok Mitra[24] writes that some thirty thousand people lost their lives in the first fifteen minutes. It is still believed by many that the District Magistrate of Midnapore, Niaz Mohammed Khan, an ICS officer who later opted for Pakistan and became an important civil servant there deliberately withheld a cyclone warning on the grounds that 'disloyal people had no right to live'. At any rate, according to Ashok Mitra[25]

he recommended to the government in his report that, in consideration of the political mischief wrought by people from the district, neither should the government take any relief measures for at least one month, nor permit any non-governmental organisation to do so. Was this being more loyal than the king – or more malevolent than the devil?

The conduct of Niaz must have been observed with considerable approval by Suhrawardy, although the latter was not in power at this time. For later, when Suhrawardy returned to power by the grace of Governor Herbert, he put Niaz to good use in the run-up to 'Direct Action', also known as the Great Calcutta Killings. This is described in the next chapter. Niaz is credited with various other feats, such as an attempt to Islamise the Arakan coast of Burma (later Myanmar) by settling Muslims from Chittagong there. He succeeded in this, but only temporarily, because later, in the 1990s the Buddhist Myanmarese government drove out all these Muslims, known as Rohingiyas, back into Bangladesh. We need only remind ourselves at this stage that it was under administrators like Niaz a few years later that the Hindus of East Bengal had to live.

The unbelievable hardship to which the population of the area were subjected to by this combination of human repression and the natural calamity was carefully hidden by the British administration from the public at large, even from the provincial cabinet. When Syama Prasad came to know of this, entirely through unofficial channels, he was incensed. He rushed to Midnapore, and upon observing the deliberate and inhuman

official callousness, took up the matter with the Governor Sir John Herbert who, quite predictably, did exactly nothing. Syama Prasad, in protest resigned from the cabinet on November 20, 1942. Sir John was waiting for such opportunities. Around this time he somehow (possibly by hinting that he would form an all-party government of which Haq would be the Premier) had persuaded Fazlul Haq to sign a resignation of his cabinet, but he kept this up his sleeve for a while. A few months later, when Haq said in the Provincial Assembly that he would have a Judicial Inquiry instituted to determine the cause of the disaster and the relief measures[26]

he sacked the Haq cabinet on March 28, 1943 with this resignation. Thereafter, using his extraordinary powers he installed a Muslim League cabinet led by Nazimuddin, with Suhrawardy as the Minister in charge of Civil Supplies. Nazimuddin flatly refused to take any non-League Muslim into his cabinet, and Haq was out. Herbert also got what he wanted : a rubber-stamp provincial cabinet, with no voice of conscience like Syama Prasad or Haq.

At this point it is necessary to take a look at the role played by the Communist Party of India at this juncture and later. This is because, as will be seen, the Indian Communists, in order to secure political gains, wholeheartedly supported the demand for Pakistan voiced by the Muslim League, and eventually played a pivotal role in preventing proper rehabilitation of the refugees from East Bengal. In order to understand their behaviour during these epoch-making years it is also necessary to briefly digress into the origin and development of Indian Communists.

Around the middle years of the twentieth century it used to be said about Indian Communists in jest, " Who is that man sweating away in an overcoat on this steamy afternoon ? Oh, that is Comrade so-and-so. But why the overcoat? Because it is snowing in Moscow." There was considerable truth in the joke, because in those days the Indian Communists were blind followers of the Soviet political line, regardless of its applicability to Indian conditions or of the national interests of India. Just how blind, and where this landed them and all those that listened to them can and ought to form the subject of a distinct line of study. For the purposes of this book the discussion will have to be limited to the bare mentioning of three aspects, namely : first, their position during India's freedom struggle ; second, their collaboration with the British Government during the war, and especially their depiction of Subhas Chandra Bose as a Japanese stooge ; and third, their role in and following the partition of the country and of Bengal.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) was founded, not in India, but at Tashkent in the erstwhile Soviet Union (now Uzbekistan) on October 17, 1920. This was very symbolic of the fact, observed throughout the life of communism in India, that the Indian communists were always far away from the aspirations of the people – in fact there was always a lack of basic understanding of Indianness among them. One of the founder-members was Manabendra Nath Roy, better known as M.N.Roy, who has been mentioned earlier in this chapter in connection with revolutionary activities in Bengal during the First World War. Roy very soon fell out with Dange, another founder-member, and the Comintern appointed a British communist with Bengali roots, Rajani Palme Dutt,

to lead the party. Thereafter Zinoviev, a member of the then-ruling 'Troika' of the Soviet Union (of which the other members were Stalin and Kamenev), ordered the fledgling CPI to become an appendage of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

The CPI was opposed to the independence movement from day one. In the first world Congress of the Communist International held in Moscow in 1920 the Programme of the International called Gandhiism a philosophy that was fast emerging as a stumbling block in the way of a people's revolution. A motion in the sixth International held in 1928, also in Moscow, pointed out that it was the duty of all communists in India to expose the Congress in India, and to resist the efforts of Swarajists, Gandhians and Congressmen of all hues.

Rabindra Nath Datta remembers how the Communists in Noakhali formed small groups to guard Police Stations, Bridges and Telegraph lines from possible attacks by Congressites during the 'Quit India' movement of August 1942.

Their treatment of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose during the war (which they used to call 'Imperialist War' until Germany attacked Russia, and 'Peoples' War' thereafter) causes them no end of embarrassment today. Especially in West Bengal where Netaji Subhas is revered as the greatest national hero of the freedom struggle, and where, coincidentally, the Communists have been in power since 1977. In fact Jyoti Basu, the Communist Chief Minister of West Bengal had said in a speech on Subhas's birthday that they had made a mistake in regard to Netaji. He did not elaborate how he, or his party, proposed to make amends for this 'mistake'. Probably his condescending to admit the mistake was enough. At any rate, the depiction of Netaji during the war is, at once, interesting and instructive.

The 'People's War', the organ of the Communist Party of India at that time, printed a series of cartoons of Subhas at that time. One of them, published in the November 21, 1943 issue showed Subhas Chandra Bose as a midget dressed in military tunic, guiding the Imperial Japanese Army into India. In the August 8, 1943 issue Subhas's face was shown as mask hiding a vile and cruel Japanese face. One of the slogans in Bangla that they coined, calling all comrades to arms, ran as follows:

"Comrade, dhoro hatiyar – dhoro hatiyar
Swadhinata shongrame nohi aaj akla
Biplobi Soviet, durjoy Mohachin
Shathey aachhey Ingrej, nirbheek Markin."

which, freely translated, means as follows:

To arms Comrades – to arms, Comrades!
We are not alone in this struggle for freedom
The Revolutionary Soviet Union, the invincible, Great China,
The British, the fearless Americans – they are all with us.

It is to be noted that Mohachin (Great China) referred to Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang China of the time, and not to Mao's Red China. The punch line, of course, is the

description of the American (Markin in Bangla) GI as ‘fearless fighters’ - by the Communist Party of India.

After the ban was lifted on the Communist Party of India, Secretary Puran Chand Joshi sent a telegram to Harry Pollitt, Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain. In the telegram, apart from mouthing the usual inanities about the ‘Anti-Fascist Solidarity of the Indian People’, he also mentioned that his co-revolutionaries had taken a suicidal path, referring of course to the Congress’s Quit India movement. To Ashok Mitra this seemed to be very clever-clever. Everyone knew that the telegram would be censored, and the idea was to let the Government know, without seeming to intend to do so, that the CPI was completely on their side[27]

.

And finally, the matter of East Bengal refugees, which is the reason why the conduct of the Communists in India is very important for the purposes of this book. When the clamour for Pakistan by the Muslim League, on the basis of Jinnah’s two-nation theory was warming up, and Congress leaders were in jail following the uprising of August 1942, the CPI released a ‘thesis’, drafted by one Gangadhar Adhikari. The substance of the thesis was that there was no such nation as India, that India was really a conglomeration of as many as eighteen different ‘nationalities’ and that each one of these nationalities had the right to secede from the conglomeration. Now the fact was that neither the Parsees of Bombay (now Mumbai), nor the Christians of Mangalore, nor the Jews of Cochin had shown the slightest inclination to secede from India, nor to declare themselves as a separate ‘nationality’. It was only Jinnah’s Muslim League, representing the opinion of the vast majority of the Muslims in India, who claimed that they were a different nation and wanted to secede ; and they loved the Adhikari thesis. However, the CPI’s espousal of Pakistan did not stop here. CPI leaders, such as Sajjad Zaheer, B.T.Ranadive, P.C.Joshi and others, actively wrote and otherwise propagandized in favour of the ‘right of secession of the Muslims of India’.

This was all before the partition actually took place. Probably the Communists expected that in the fledgling state of Pakistan they would be much better off as a party than they were in undivided India. Alas, this was not to be. The atheist Communists with Hindu names were treated no differently from their God-fearing Hindu brethren, and with the exception of very few like Moni Singh they had all to leave their beloved Pakistan for which they had done so much clamouring.

Dhananjoy Basak[28]

, formerly of Nawabpur, Dacca City, recalls that his cousin Gopal Basak was an important organiser of the Communist Party of India, and had been named in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. People like P.C.Joshi and Muzaffar Ahmed were regular visitors to their house at Nawabpur. He had, however, taken fright at the look of the Muslim majority after the riots of 1946. He was one of the first among their clan to flee to India after the country as partitioned.

Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti, one of the very few serious researchers on the subject of East Bengal refugees generally agrees with this conclusion[29]

, and provides further insight into the blundering ways of the CPI. According to Chakrabarti the Communist party initially "simply refused to accept the existence of the luckless victims of communal hatred . . . . . the party felt that once the panacea of partition was implemented the communal virus would be completely eradicated from the Indian body politic. The party directed its Pakistan cadres not to migrate to India . . . . even (front ranking leaders such as) Sajjad Zaheer, Krishnabinode Roy and Mansur Habibullah were expelled from the party when they came back to India after their release from Pakistan jail".

What happened after partition in West Bengal is relevant to this book only so far as the same influenced events in East Bengal. The conduct of Communists had such an influence only to a marginal extent, and therefore will be mentioned only in passing. There were a number of ex-revolutionaries among the refugees who had turned Communist after their revolutionary fervour had died out. They were joined in West Bengal by the local Communists, and together they formed a Communist core among the refugees. This formation of a core has been masterfully dealt with in Prafulla Chakrabarti's book mentioned above, and the serious reader is referred to that book for a fuller treatment of the subject. The refugee problem in Bengal was mismanaged to an extent beyond belief by the Nehru government, as will be seen later in this book. It is this that helped the Communists grow in the state, something that did not happen in most other parts of India. And it is that growth in the refugee camps of those days that culminated in the unbroken rule by the party in the state since 1977.

The Communists taught the refugees to fight for their rights. So far so good. However the forms of fight were such as would in later years brand Bengali refugees, without justification, as a feckless, lazy, unreasonable, undisciplined constantly agitating bunch of people. The refugees were taught to demand cash doles, not jobs, to travel in trains without tickets, to hold up road traffic as a form of protest and to squat on other peoples' land. The government obliged, spoiling the habits of an entire generation and making heroes out of the Communists. The government made plans to resettle the refugees in the Andaman Islands. This was a very good idea, because the islands had a climate and soil very similar to that of East Bengal. They were moreover totally virgin, with no possibilities of any clash with the local population, something that happened later in parts of Dandakaranya. The Communists persuaded the refugees to refuse rehabilitation in the Andamans, and demanded resettlement only in West Bengal. There was opposition in powerful quarters against the East Bengal refugees going to the Andamans, and those quarters could not be more thankful.

Ironically, after the Communists were voted to power in 1977, and some of the later refugees were under resettlement in Dandakaranya (a rocky and semi-arid tract of land at the tri-junction of the states of Orissa, Andhra and Madhya Pradesh) some misguided non-political elements among them led them to return to West Bengal. The refugees sold, literally for a song, whatever they had been given by the government for setting up

a new life there, as also what they had earned for themselves. They then trooped to West Bengal in the hope that the newly installed Communists would help them[30]

.

Here they met a different lot of Bengali Communists who did not need their support any more. They were summarily told to return to Dandakaranya. These refugees had burnt their boats and were not to be persuaded so easily to return. They defied the government and sailed, in makeshift country boats, to a remote uninhabited island called Marichjhaanpi in the Sundarban delta and tried to set up a settlement without any help from the government. The government retaliated by sending the police on the one hand and Communist goons on the other. Some of the refugees were killed by these goons. Some, in trying to escape from them by swimming across the estuary, were eaten by crocodiles. The rest were packed off in special trains to Dandakaranya where they went, made refugees a second time, by a set of politicians who came to power by dangling before their compatriots the prospect of rehabilitation in West Bengal. Sunil Ganguly[31] has described poignant scenes of this period in his immensely popular novel in Bangla, Purba-Pashchim (East-West)[32]

.

Now we can return to the Bengal of March 1943 when Sir John Herbert, the Governor of Bengal, ousted the ministry of Fazlul Haq, and installed in its place the Muslim League ministry with Khwaja Nazimuddin as the Premier, and Suhrawardy as the Minister for Civil Supplies. In 1946 Suhrawardy became

the Premier replacing Nazimuddin. During this period most important posts at the cutting edge of the government, such as the Officers-in-charge of the police stations, came to be manned by Muslims, pushing Hindu officers to ineffectual posts. The government was unabashedly partisan, and said so in so many words. It was a government from which a Hindu could expect no justice.

What the situation was like in those times has been described by in his inimitable style by Rajshekhar Bose in one of his short stories, Goopee Shaheb. Goopee Shaheb (real name Gopinath Ghosh, a Hindu) was an eccentric who used to keep scorpions as pets in his pockets. One day a pickpocket called Chottu Mian (a Muslim) tried to practise his profession on Goopee, and was promptly delivered several near-fatal stings by Goopee’s pets. The author, who was a roommate of Goopee in his 'mess' (bachelor accommodation), was called to furnish bail for Goopee. For it was Goopee, and not Chottu, who had been prosecuted by Gulzar Hussain, the Muslim Officer-in-charge, Muchipara police station, on the charge of attempted homicide of Chottu by getting him stung by scorpions. The author protested meekly while furnishing bail. Gulzar Hussain roared back, telling the author not to try to teach him the law ; for, according to him, even if poverty sometimes drove Chottu to pick pockets, it fell on Gulzar, Mr. Suhrawardy and the Governor to take care of the matter. Goopee had no right to take the law in his own hands.

Sunil Ganguly, in his Purba-Pashchim, writes of the filling of a vacancy of a lecturer in a Government college near Calcutta. The job was given to a Muslim with a third class M.A. degree in preference to a Hindu with a first class degree. When this was pointed out to Nazimuddin he stated quite brazenly that it was the decision of the provincial cabinet that the job must go to a Muslim. First or second class would naturally be preferred, but third class would also do, so long as the candidate was Muslim [33]

.

That is what those days were like. It was after passing through days for more than four years that the country and Bengal got independence and partition on 15th August 1947. That was however not to be before the province also passed through the unbelievable trauma of three macro-horrors in the space of these four years. These horrors were : first, the Bengal Famine of 1943 ; second, the Calcutta Killings of August 1946 ; and the third, the Noakhali Carnage of October in the same year. These three events saw the death of so many people on such a massive scale in so little time, and such unspeakably nefarious and unconscionable conduct on the part of the Muslim League as well as of the British governments, that they deserve at least a full chapter to be devoted to them. Hence, the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

[1] Jogesh Chandra Bagal, in his historical work in Bangla, Muktir Shondhane Bharat, ba Bharater Nobojagoroner Itibritto, S.K.Mitra & Bros., 1st Ed., 1940, p. 245

[2]

The Oxford History of India, ibid. p. 806

[3]

Roses in December, an autobiography, with epilogue ; by M.C.Chagla ; Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 10th Ed., 1994. Chagla (1900-1981), a Bombay Muslim barrister just like Jinnah, was in many ways Jinnah's exact antithesis. While Jinnah after the 1920's became a totally communal Muslim politician, Chagla remained in the profession and entered the judiciary to become a puisne judge at the Bombay High Court in 1941. Later he became Chief Justice, and after retirement, a judge in the International Court of Justice at The Hague, Indian ambassador to the U.S, U.K., and finally, Union Education Minister in Nehru's cabinet.. All his life he was a strictly secular person -- secular in the true sense, for he staunchly believed in concepts such as the Uniform Civil Code, and was a strong critic of minority appeasement policies followed by successive governments in India. See pages 84-85, 160-161 of the autobiography for this aspect.

[4]

ibid., p.78-79

[5]

ibid., p. 119

[6]

Swami Vivekananda had compared the action of trying to take religion out of the hearts of Indians to trying to make the Ganga River flow backwards from the sea to the Himalayas and then making it flow on a new channel (Jago Juboshokti, 3rd Ed., p. 24, in Bangla). Yet that is what Nehru had attempted in independent India, with predictably disastrous results.

[7]

Forty years later this Malabar coast again became famous in the same context when E.M.S.Namboodiripad, the first communist Chief Minister of India, in order to appease the Moplah Muslims, carved out a Muslim-majority district called Malappuram in this area. Namboodiripad was one of the strongest adherents of the theory that a 'little bit' of Muslim communalism was to be tolerated, even welcomed, but anything remotely resembling Hindu communalism was to be nipped in the bud.

[8]

Moulana Mohammed Ali together with his brother Shaukat Ali were leaders in the Khilafat movement, who eventually became champions of Muslim rights (Vincent A. Smith, ibid. p. 807)

[9]

Roses in December, ibid, p.78, 81

[10]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 232

[11]

The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, by Louis Fischer, 1st paperback Ed., Harper and Row, New York, 1983, p. 447

[12]

“Deshbibhag : Poshchat o Nepottho Kahini” (in Bangla) by Bhabani Prosad Chatterjee, 1st Ed., 1993 Ananda Publishers, Calcutta.

[13]

ibid. p. 35

[14]

Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (1900-1959), Barrister, Ashraf Muslim from the Midnapore district of present-day West Bengal, Civil Supplies Minister and later Premier of Bengal in the Muslim League ministry, 1943-47, Prime Minister of Pakistan, 1956-57 Suhrawardy was guilty of many misdeeds in his political life, including black market operations in the great Bengal famine of 1943, and inciting and actively promoting the notorious great Calcutta killings. In 1947 he tried to form, with Sarat Chandra Bose, an independent Bengal instead of accepting partition. A very flamboyant person in his personal life, Suhrawardy while still Premier, used to frequent a nightclub called the ‘Golden Slipper’ in Calcutta, and used to drive his own Packard. Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre in their ‘Freedom at Midnight’ have described him as setting himself the prodigious task of bedding every cabaret dancer and high-class whore in Calcutta (p. 255).

[15]

Nalini Ranjan Sarker (1882-1953) founder of the Hindusthan group of companies with interests in Insurance, Real Estate, Edible oils and several others. Later joined the Congress and became the Finance Minister of West Bengal.

[16]

Jinnah of Pakistan, Stanley Wolpert, Oxford University Press, 2nd Indian Impression 1989 p. 143

[17]

Thy Hand, Great Anarch, ibid p. 465

[18]

ibid. p. 458

[19]

ibid. p. 467

[20]

Syama Prasad Mookerjee (1901-1953) Often called Bharat Kesri (Lion of India), the second son of Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee, (known popularly as Banglar Bagh, the tiger of Bengal). Syama Prasad, in his young days was an educationist, having become the Vice-Chancellor of the venerable Calcutta University at the very young age of 33. He entered politics at the instance of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the president of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, and began political life as the Vice-President of that party. He was the first significant Bengal politician to see clearly what fate the Hindu minority in Bengal was suffering and would suffer, and also to speak out openly against it. In 1941 he formed a coalition Government with A.K.Fazlul Haq which gave Bengal a just and equitable administration. He left this cabinet in protest against the British treatment of the victims of the Midnapore cyclone. In 1947 he became the Industries Minister in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet, but left it in 1950 in protest against Nehru's treatment of the Hindu refugees from East Bengal. He became the founder-President of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (predecessor of the present-day Bharatiya Janata Party) in 1951. He forcibly entered Kashmir against the policy of the Nehru government to allow Indians to enter the state only with a permit. He was taken prisoner and died in captivity under very questionable circumstances in Srinagar jail.

[21]

Amar Dekha Rajneetir Ponchas Bochhor (Fifty years of Politics as I saw it) in Bangla, pub. Dacca 1970, by Abul Mansur Ahmed (1898-1979). Abul Mansur Ahmed was a journalist, editor of Krishak, and later Nobojug, the official organ of the Krishak Proja Party, and very close to Fazlul Haq.

[22]

Jukto Bonger Sriti, ibid. p. 18

[23]

The contents of this and the previous few paragraphs are based on an interview of Nirupom Som (b. 1930), an officer of the Indian Police Service who had served as both

Commissioner of Police, Calcutta and Director-General of Police, West Bengal. Som's father was a judicial officer in the Bengal District Judiciary having retired as a District and Sessions Judge, and therefore he had lived all his life amidst Government folklore. Some of what he said is undoubtedly from the police grapevine, but nevertheless cannot be summarily dismissed.

[24]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid., Part II p. 146

[25]

ibid. p. 147

[26]

ibid. p. 147

[27]

ibid. p. 120

[28]

Interviewed June 2001

[29]

The Marginal Men : The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal ; by Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti, Naya Udyog, Calcutta ; 2nd Ed., 1999, p. 39-44

[30]

Interview with R.A.Rangaswamy, sometime Executive Engineer, Dandakaranya Development Project.

[31]

Sunil Ganguly (b. 1934), a popular contemporary Bengali novelist of West Bengal and himself a refugee from Faridpur, East Bengal.

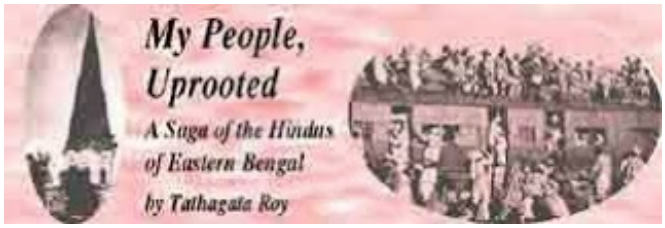
[32]

Purba-Pashchim (East-West), a novel in Bangla, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1st Ed., 1997

[33] Purba-Pashchim, ibid., p. 94

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-3-three-horrors-of-forties.html



Chapter 3

THE THREE HORRORS OF THE FORTIES

The nineteen-forties were not good years for most countries of the world

It is here that this chapter is relevant to the subject of this book. Of the three horrors, the first was a result of British misdeeds coupled with Muslim League inaction and mischief ; the last two were deliberate, diabolical acts by the Muslim League, with the British standing by impotently. It is no wonder that Hindus of East Bengal met their fate with the Muslim League in power.

It is fashionable in secular circles in India today to accept a theory unquestioningly, that every communal riot is the result of misdeeds of a few villains, in which the rest of the peace-loving population unwittingly gets embroiled. A street hoarding put up by the Communist Government of West Bengal in Calcutta in 1992 read “Amra Eksonge Chhilam/Amra Eksonge Achhi/Amra Eksonge Thakbo/Dhormo Niye Hanahani Korbo Na” meaning “We (Hindus and Muslims) have always been together/We are together/We shall always be together/ We shall not fight each other for Religion”. The lie of the lines is manifest and does not have to be explained. Ashok Mitra, the veteran administrator also strongly disagrees with this view. He says, in the context of Govind Nihalani’s telefilm Tamas (Darkness), based on the book of the same name by Bhisham Sahni, that this is just wishful thinking and oversimplification, betraying the Ostrich-like attitude of the ‘so-called (Indian) Marxists’[1]

. This is exactly what has been referred to as the Indian ‘Holy Ghost of Communal Harmony and Secularism’ in the preface to this book. Mitra goes on to say that only those who have no first-hand experience of communal riots, or those who refuse to face reality in the name of ‘secularism’ and ‘humanism’ can choose to ignore the terrible violence that religious fervour can bring about.

But it is advantageous to proceed in a chronological order. The Bengal famine of 1943 was the first in line. What makes it particularly horrific is the fact that it was not a result of any flood, drought or pestilence but entirely a man-made tragedy, What was it like?

It was a time when the skeletal remains of what had once been human beings, and were now barely so, used to roam the streets of Calcutta by the thousands, crying Ektu Phan dao go ma (O mother, give us some ‘phan’ – the supernatant starchy liquid that is poured off after rice has been boiled). These were mostly women clutching to their bosoms even

more emaciated children with huge heads, protruding bellies and matchsticks for limbs. They died by the thousands on the streets, as often from eating too much after days of starvation as from starvation itself. Corpses floating by on the Hooghly River were a common sight. They used to come from nearby districts, chiefly Midnapore, where the cyclone of October 1942 had killed off an astounding number of people, mostly men who were out of doors when the cyclone surprised them. The womenfolk were then left to fend for themselves, and finding nothing at all to eat, traveled to Calcutta. The people from faraway districts such as those in East Bengal found this difficult, and stayed on where they were, to die there. Ashok Mitra at this time was the Sub-Divisional Officer of Munshigunge in Dacca district and describes these deaths in words that are at once poignant and macabre.

According to Mitra[2]

, the real ordeal for the people of Munshigunge began in August 1943. Till July they had somehow survived. One more month was too much. The people that he used to observe in the countryside were emaciated beyond belief, with their skins sticking like paper to their skeletons while the bones protruded out. Their body hair stuck out like thick black pins all over their bodies. Their stare was blank, there was no light left in their eyes, and they used to take quite some time to focus on anything. The mass deaths started next month, and the worst period was between 15th September and 15th October. By this time the district administration had started Langarkhanas (Soup Kitchens) all over, of which there were nearly a hundred in Munshigunge. The fare at the beginning was rice without the phan poured off, later replaced by Khichuri made of three parts rice, one part masoor dal (a protein-rich lentil), some turmeric, mustard oil and salt, some fried potatoes and gourd. This nutritious fare following months of starvation immediately used to cause their bodies to swell up like balloons, and their skins stretched to a translucent state like that of the white of an egg. And then they would die. Mitra says that he had given up all hopes to make these people live, his only satisfaction being that the poor souls had got to eat a bellyful before they died.

According to Rabindra Nath Datta, in the rural areas of Noakhali district during the height of the famine the affected people used to roam around during the day in search of something to eat, and at night used to come and lie down in the grounds of the Haat (weekly market). Every morning around half-a-dozen of them would be found dead. The bulk of these people were cultivators and Muslim. The local Muslims formed parties to identify the Muslims among the dead (by checking whether the males were circumcised or not), and buried them in a mass grave after reading their Namaaz-e-Janaaza (funereal rites). The few Hindu corpses among them would be thrown into rivers or canals. The shrimp and the crabs in these canals would then feast on the dead bodies. The famine-affected people would then catch and eat such shrimp and crabs, and would promptly die from Gastro-Enteritis.

According to Syama Prasad Mookerjee[3]

, in Midnapore a starving man fell unconscious from sheer excitement at the sight of

food in a Langarkhana before he could put any in his mouth. He died shortly afterwards.

Now what caused this unspeakable human tragedy? Amartya Sen has remarked that a major famine is possible only in a totalitarian and secretive polity, because in any other polity information about famine immediately results in a clamour for corrective measures, and at the same time help pours in from different quarters. On the other hand a Dictator sees a famine as a proof of his failure to govern.. Thus, to him, unless a famine is hidden from the rest of the world – including the rest of his own country as far as possible – it may lead to his own downfall. In recent times such famines have taken place in Asia in Mao Zedong's China in the late 1950s and in Kim Il-Jong's North Korea in the 1990s – both totally closed, very secretive, very totalitarian polities. Surely the British in Bengal in 1943 could not have been like Mao and Kim? True, there was a war raging, but the British government was still answerable to the Parliament, and an Indian-run government was ruling at Calcutta albeit under British suzerainty!

In fact, in Bengal of 1943 the British Government was no different from Mao's and Kim's – just as repressive, and just as secretive, as we shall see.

The root of the famine lay apparently in two unrelated incidents: primarily in the advance of the Imperial Japanese towards India, and secondarily in the Midnapore cyclone of October 1942. According to Ashok Mitra the process began not with any act of the Japanese, but with the disappearance of Subhas Chandra Bose from his Elgin Road residence on January 27, 1941 (this has been referred to earlier), and later his tying up with the Axis powers[4]. Nirad C. Chaudhuri differs with this, saying that Subhas was not under any kind of surveillance at all, and his disappearance was of no great significance to the British[5]

, but most people would accept Mitra's version. Mitra had much more interaction with Herbert than Chaudhuri did, and as an ICS officer was much better placed or qualified to read the mind the Governor or of the provincial administration than Chaudhuri. Encyclopaedia Britannica also supports the view that he was closely watched. On the other hand probably the incurable anglophile Chaudhuri could never bring himself round to believe that the British police could be outwitted by the desi Subhas and his young nephews.

According to Mitra Herbert took the disappearance of Subhas as a personal affront, a gigantic slap on his face, as Mitra puts it. Linlithgow (the Viceroy) and Whitehall must also have found this particularly galling, because it signified a failure on the part of the Police too. Subhas's tying up with the Germans and the Japanese made matters worse, because at this juncture the Royal Navy, hitherto considered invincible, was taking a terrible beating at the hands of the Japanese. Japanese kamikaze suicide bombers off Singapore sank H.M.S. Prince of Wales and Repulse, two prize battleships of the Royal Navy, on December 10, 1941. On January 19, 1942 the Japanese attacked the British colony of Burma. A few bombs dropped in Bengal, especially in the Calcutta docks, and the Feni area of Noakhali district near the Burma border. India was apparently the next stop, and

Bengal the threshold. The entire British administration was on its edge. It was at this juncture that the Congress started its Quit India movement, and the extent to which Midnapore carried it has already been stated.

Mitra says that the attack on Burma made Herbert lose all sense of proportion. He, on his own, without even consulting the Provincial Government (the Progressive Coalition cabinet at this time) decided to launch a scorched-earth policy of the type followed by the Russians in the wake of the Nazi invasion of Ukraine and Russia. Herbert called it the policy of 'Denial and Evacuation'. But there was a difference. In Ukraine and Russia the Germans were a reality, not a threat; also the Russians and Ukrainians were not fond of the Germans, to say the least. The scorched-earth policy was therefore spontaneous. As opposed to this the Japanese were a mere distant threat. In fact they never came to India. In all probability they had no intention to come to India – their occupation of Burma was probably directed towards cutting off the land route to China. Also the people of Midnapore had no more hatred of the Japanese than they had of the British. Therefore they had no intention to burn their own produce and run away from their own land. It appears that largely these excesses of Herbert prompted the extent of the revolt in Midnapore in August 1942.

These fine points were totally lost on the fear-crazed Herbert. Also, later in the year, to his fear of the Japanese was added a desire to wreak vengeance on the 'natives'[6]

for what they did during the Quit India phase. He carried out the twin policies of Denial and Evacuation in Midnapore under a veil of total secrecy and in an absolutely draconian manner. Such was the secrecy according to Mitra that there was neither any reporting in the press nor did anything get recorded in the archives. As a result it will never be known when exactly the policy has first put into implementation in Midnapore and when it was withdrawn.

However what happened in Munshigunge was right in front of Mitra's own eyes and as the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) he was very much part of it. He joined his post on February 5, 1942, and in the manner of ICS officers of those days immediately undertook an intensive tour of the sub-division. There were a number of Gonjo-s (the equivalent of the North Indian Mandi) for storing rice and paddy in the area. In none of them he found any stock of more than a few hundred bags of rice, although he was told that in major gonjo-s like Mirqadim or Louhajang there always used to remain a minimum stock of some ten thousand bags of rice.

What happened actually? Governor Herbert's scorched-earth policy of Denial, that's what happened. It worked two ways. First, Government agents, together with the Police, would raid all locations where major stocks of foodstuff could be expected. They would then throw away the rice or forcibly take it away, to be stocked in Government warehouses. Anyone who resisted was not only beaten up severely, but was also not paid a farthing. How much rice or paddy was thrown away in this manner will never be known. What was stocked in warehouses began to be released from June 1944, when

rationing was first introduced. Because of total lack of any hygiene or care in these warehouses the rice became putrid and foul smelling and mixed with muck and tiny pieces of stone called kankar – inedible for all practical purposes.

The other aspect of Herbert's denial policy was the mass destruction of all indigenous means of transportation of foodstuff. This meant the sinking of thousands of country boats (some of them, such as the balam nouka, being as big as small barges) in East Bengal, and the breaking of tens of thousands of bullock carts everywhere. Even bicycles were not spared. This stopped movement of rice from and to the interior. On the other hand movement by rail, steamer or truck was not stopped. However rail wagons manufactured in India were exported in large numbers, causing a serious shortage all over the Indian Railway system. It must be remembered that at that time movement by road was only a small proportion of the total, the major part of bulk movement of food grain being by rail.

With the removal of rice from the market and the destruction of all country transport, the inevitable result followed : prices soared. The price of rice per maund (about thirty-six kilogrammes or eighty pounds) in February 1942 was about Four Rupees. It jumped to Sixteen Rupees per maund in December 1942, and to a Hundred Rupees in September 1943. The little rice that was in the market therefore moved away to where the purchasing power was, namely to Calcutta. The countryside just starved. How they starved has already been described in Mitra's first-hand account of Munshigunge and Syama Prasad Mookerjee's description of Midnapore.

According to Mitra the unholy combination of three people at the helm were primarily responsible for this tragedy[7]

in which, according to unofficial estimates, five million people died. These three were Secretary of State for India L.S.Amery ; Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy ; and, of course, Herbert. Just a nod from Lord Linlithgow to transport foodgrains on a war footing from other provinces to Bengal could have flooded Bengal, because there was no shortage of foodgrains in the North, West or South. No such nod was, however, forthcoming. Both Linlithgow and Amery tried very hard to conceal the facts and the implications of the famine from the British Parliament, although Amery, in his diary, has tried later to put the entire blame for this on Churchill. They also hid the entire tragedy from the food-surplus countries like U.S.A., Australia or New Zealand – these countries would have definitely come to the rescue of the province to whatever extent possible under the conditions then prevailing. Even the Civil and Military Gazette of Lahore, a very British-friendly newspaper, made caustic remarks about the secretiveness of the Bengal Government during this time. All these point to the apathy of an Amery, the cynicism of a Linlithgow, and the unspeakable vengefulness of a Herbert, sick in mind and body,.

Herbert eventually fell so ill while the famine was raging that Sir Thomas Rutherford, the Governor of Bihar had to be asked to take additional charge of the Governorship of Bengal from September 6, 1943. Herbert died shortly thereafter, on December 11. Meanwhile on October 5, 1943 Lord Wavell replaced Linlithgow as Viceroy. Things

immediately began to take a turn for the better. Herbert hardly ever stirred out of the Governor's residence (the present Raj Bhavan of Calcutta), and Linlithgow did not pay a single visit to Bengal during the famine. As opposed to this on October 26, 1943 Lord and Lady Wavell with Rutherford walked the streets of Calcutta to take a look at humanity dying en masse because of the misdeeds of other humans.

Ashok Mitra, self-confessed Communist sympathiser, is full of regret when he tries to describe the role of the Communist Party of India in the famine. Front-ranking leaders of the Party, such as S.A.Dange and P.C.Joshi made long speeches in the first Congress of the Communist Party at Bombay held on May 23-26, 1943. The famine was a reality then, and the worst was yet to come. The entire content of their speeches was full of exhortations to the people of India to strengthen the war effort. Not once did they mention that the famine was a result of the misdeeds of the British, not even that in order to win the war it was necessary that the people should be fed. Their speeches appeared to Ashok Mitra to be directed mainly at pleasing Linlithgow and Maxwell who had lifted the ban on the party a short while ago[8]

.

Mitra is also quite positive about another aspect of the famine. To this day it is widely believed that the primary cause of the famine was reckless hoarding by Hindu foodgrain traders. The name of one Ranada Prasad Saha, a major wholesale trader of rice in East Bengal, along with a few others, is often mentioned in this connection. According to Mitra the famine was not at all the result of hoarding by traders. True, there was quite a lot of hoarding – but according to him this was not even a tertiary cause of the famine, rather it was the effect. This bogey of hoarding by local traders was mouthed with remarkable consistency by all British officials right up to Amery, presumably to cover their own tracks.

Mitra relates the instance of a raid that he and his colleague in the police, Madanmohan Lal Hooja, did on the warehouses at Mirqadim. He says that there was no way that the traders might have been forewarned about their raid, yet they found only a few hundred bags in one corner of one godown. Still, just to create an atmosphere against hoarding they arrested the owner of the godown, one Basanta Mondal, whom they handcuffed and walked round Mirqadim village with a rope tied round his waist before being put in lock-up. All guns belonging to him and his family were confiscated. Both Mitra and Hooja had to face a lot of flak later for this act, for Basanta Mondal was a nephew of the influential Raja of Bhagyakul (a major Zamindari), and they would both have been in serious trouble were it not for the support given to them by Llewellyn, the District Magistrate[9]

.

Amartya Sen, in a scholarly study of the famine[10]

, has also completely rejected what is known in Economics as FAD (Food Availability Decline) to be the reason for the famine. This was found to be the cause of the famine by the Famine Enquiry Commission. According to the Commission the number of people who died uin the famine was around 1.5 million, but Sen quotes one of the members of the Commission, W.R.Aykroyd, to have said in 1974 that the number was really between 3 and 4 million. As expected, Sen deals primarily with the Economics of the famine, almost to the total exclusion of the Politics of it. The Denial policy of Governor Herbert is disposed of in a single footnote, and Evacuation is not touched at all. Amartya Sen is of the view that the policy of 'boat denial' contributed to a general rise in the price of fish, while that of 'rice denial' caused local scarcities.

Sen's entire analysis is based on published material -- he was only ten years old when the famine took place, too young to even carry a coherent memory of it. Mitra, on the other hand, has written his stuff entirely on first-hand experience. He was also in the thick of the administration and as a member of the exclusive ICS club privy to most of its secrets. They both, however, seem to agree on one central point : the famine was not the result of any scarcity of foodgrains caused by any crop failure, flood, drought or pestilence. In other words it was man-made.

So much for what the British did. Now to the deeds of the Muslim League cabinet that Herbert so lovingly installed in April 1943, and very specially of the Minister in charge of Civil Supplies, Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. Suhrawardy, as we shall see, first made a fool of himself by absurd remarks about the famine, and then attempted to 'do his bit' in the most questionable manner possible. True, the famine was not his creation, it was principally Herbert's – but he did whatever was possible under the circumstances to make things worse.

In a hard-hitting speech made in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on July 14, 1943, Syama Prasad Mookerjee lambasted Suhrawardy and his performance. Certain parts of the speech were so telling that they deserve to be quoted: ". . . . Now, Sir, in one of the statements issued by Mr. Suhrawardy it was said that the worst feature of the last Ministry's food policy (meaning Fazlul Haq's Ministry) was its insistence on shortage. That was on 17th May (1943). Then again, he said 'There is, in fact a sufficiency of foodgrains for the people of Bengal'. I ask specially the members who are sitting opposite, anxious to give their support to the Ministry, to demand an explanation from Mr. Suhrawardy. What were the data before him that justified him to make that remark that there was in fact a sufficiency of foodgrains for the people of Bengal? Not satisfied with this bare statement, he proceeded to remark 'Full statistical details, which will clearly demonstrate that there is a sufficiency, will soon be published'. Where are those statistics? Have they been collected, or are they being manufactured?"

When these words were being spoken neither Suhrawardy nor any of the Muslim League members said a word in protest, because they had nothing to say. Worse than that, each one of them knew that Suhrawardy had been glibly mouthing these falsehoods merely to please Herbert, through whose grace they were now Ministers. And even worse, they all

knew that the majority of the victims of the famine were Muslims, mainly artisans, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labour, who had been worst hit by Herbert's policy of Denial and Evacuation.

Syama Prasad went on to say "Mr. Amery declared (in the House of Commons) – 'Yes, there is some trouble in India and in Bengal, but there is no shortage of foodstuff in the country; there is only hoarding and maldistribution . . . .' Now Sir, what happened next? Mr. Suhrawardy declared that there was plenty of foodstuffs in Bengal. All that had to be done was to find out the foodstuff even from under the taktaposhes[11]

. After a tired and busy day he seriously made a speech declaring that, if necessary, he would himself go under the taktaposh of every householder and bring out the rice. I know that many householders got nervous. If Mr. Suhrawardy really starts entering into the households and going under the taktaposh at night or even during daytime, heaven protect those householders from the after-effects of those ministerial attacks! Could there have been, I ask, a sillier approach to a problem vitally affecting the lives of millions of people?"

Such comic-opera conduct in the face of an indescribable human tragedy was characteristic of Suhrawardy. He put out a public notification in English and Bangla which ran as follows: "An Appeal and a Warning : You must not grind the faces of the poor (Abedan o Shotorkobani : Gorib jonosadharon ke aar utpiron kora cholibe na)". To this Syama Prasad quipped in his speech "Who is that 'you'? Is Mr. Suhrawardy standing before a mirror and addressing himself, or was he seriously addressing the people of Bengal?"

Ashok Mitra describes a small incident of his personal experience with Suhrawardy which throws a lot of light on the character of the man. Suhrawardy had come to visit Munshigunge on November 28, 1943. By that time the worst was definitely over. Suhrawardy addressed a gathering of about five hundred in the playing field of Haraganga College. In this meeting Suhrawardy first expressed the ritual regrets for the death of so many people. Then a local Advocate, in a fit of sycophancy while delivering his speech, compared Suhrawardy to Goddess Lakshmi (the Hindu Goddess of prosperity) descended from heaven and requested him to investigate why the local administration did not let him know about the starvation deaths. Suhrawardy pounced upon this and said that when he had spent such a lot of money in famine relief during the last few months, he could easily have spent another few Crores and sent a consignment of rice to Munshigunge – if only he had been informed in time. At this Mitra lost his cool, and said in public that the Minister should rather investigate why, in spite of the SDO sending so many telegrams, the news did not reach him.

Mitra says Apurba Chanda (who had taught Mitra in his college, and was now Suhrawardy's Secretary and had accompanied him to Munshigunge), before leaving left a word of friendly advice. He said Suhrawardy was a very vindictive man. Mitra should therefore collect and carefully preserve all papers which would show that Mitra had indeed repeatedly asked for famine relief. This advice was worth Chanda's weight in gold,

as Mitra put it. Suhrawardy sent officer after officer to Munshigunge who pestered him until early 1944, and it was only these papers that saved him from further trouble[12]

.

The positive contribution of Suhrawardy to famine relief efforts was the appointment of Sole Purchasing Agents of the Government of Bengal for the purchase of foodgrains from neighbouring provinces with the eventual intention of distributing them through a rationing system. Incredible as it may seem today, Suhrawardy appointed M.M. Ispahani Ltd. (see endnote 50) as such Sole Purchasing Agents without any competitive bidding, without negotiations either with Ispahani or any other agent, without taking the Assembly into confidence, as if he was dishing out some largesse from his personal funds. Not only so, but thereafter the Government, under Suhrawardy's orders, made an advance of Rs. 20,000,000 – Twenty Million or Two Crores of Rupees – to the Ispahanis without any contract, without a single scrap of paper. What followed was what any commercial organisation would do given such unbelievable opportunities. They looted. Ispahani being one of the principal financiers of the Muslim League, it should not be difficult to imagine where a part of the money went, and why Suhrawardy did what he did.

Syama Prasad in his speech before the Bengal Assembly addressed this question also. He said " I have nothing personal against Mr. Ispahani . . . . it is a question of principle. It was nothing short of a scandal that the ministry should have appointed a particular firm as its sole agent, and what is more, advanced about two crores of rupees to that firm without a single scrap of document. Can Mr. Suhrawardy produce a single contract entered upon between the Ispahanis and the Government of Bengal? It is a mockery".

Such was the handling of a human tragedy done by The Hon'ble Mr. Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, in reward of which he was made Premier of Bengal in 1946 replacing Sir Nazimuddin. But this bungling was nothing compared to what he did on August 16, 1946, which is remembered to this day as the Great Calcutta Killings. The run-up for this started much earlier sometime in 1945, when he proceeded to change the complexion of the Calcutta Police beyond what Herbert had done earlier.[13]

The constables of the Calcutta Police were, as a rule, recruited according to what was known as the A.B.C.D. rule – which meant that they were drawn all from the districts of Arrah, Balia, Chhapra and Deoria. These are districts around the boundary of the United Provinces and Bihar, in the area generally known as Bhojpur. People from this area are well-built, tough and loyal – almost ideal police constable material. There was just one problem that Premier Suhrawardy had with them. They were all devout Hindus, and moreover, worshippers of Lord Hanuman, the Hindu God who personifies strength, manliness and undying loyalty to his master, Lord Rama. They, therefore, could not be trusted to carry out the designs that Suhrawardy had in mind.

In order to get round this problem Suhrawardy turned to Niaz Mohammed Khan, the ICS officer who, while District Magistrate of Midnapore, had carried out Herbert's nefarious

designs of crackdown on the participants in the Quit India movement. The idea was to Muslimise the Calcutta Police. Why the Calcutta Police in particular? Because Calcutta had already been chosen by the Muslim League as the theatre of the bloodbath that had been scheduled on 16th August 1946, in what they would call 'Direct Action', and what the rest of the world would eventually call the Great Calcutta Killings.

Niaz Mohammed Khan, under Suhrawardy's orders journeyed to the Northwest to recruit Punjabi Muslim and Pathan constables for the Calcutta Police. Pathans are Pashto-speaking Muslim tribesmen inhabiting the barren hills of the frontier, and are divided into a large number of tribes such as Afridi, Mohmand, Waziri, Khattak, Yusufzai etc. Blood feuds among them between different tribes or different groups (called khel) in the same tribe are still very common. These tribes are by nature extremely fierce and cruel – in fact they had been extensively used in British jails in India for application of third-degree methods. Under the benign leadership of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God) party a considerable number of them had become mellowed and come closer to the Indian mainstream, but this had made little difference to the people away from towns like Peshawar and Kohat. There was another feature that should be mentioned. Because their womenfolk were all kept in strict purdah – the Pathans are first cousins of the present-day Afghan Taliban – these rural Pathans had no respect for women, nor were they accustomed to seeing women out in the open. This had some extremely unsavoury consequences.

Harrison Road (now known as Mahatma Gandhi Road) is one of the arterial roads of Calcutta, connecting the two Railway terminuses at Sealdah and Howrah. On this road premises no. 100 was a rambling six-storey mansion inhabited by Hindu families. The building was also located at the very boundary of Hindu and Muslim dominated areas. One day several of these Pathan policemen barged into 100 Harrison Road and gang-raped a number of the women in the building. There was a huge furore, but none was prosecuted. One reason why the partition of the province of Bengal found favour with the Hindus of the province was 'the misbehaviour of Punjabi Muslim policemen who had recently been recruited by the provincial government'[14]

.

As already mentioned, after Herbert fell ill in September 1943, Rutherford, the Governor of Bihar took additional charge as Governor of Bengal. The next permanent Governor of Bengal was Richard Casey, an Australian, and an engineer by profession. He is said to have been disgusted with the ways of the 'Poms' in India and sometime later asked to be relieved. On February 18, 1946 he was replaced by Frederick Burrows, the last British Governor at Calcutta, an ex-Railway Guard, who later played a very questionable role during the Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali Carnage.

The 'big picture' of all-India politics was meanwhile changing very fast. In the first post-war British election the Conservatives lost and Labourite Clement Attlee became the Prime Minister. One of his first steps in regard to India was to send a Cabinet Mission to India led by Lord Pethick-Lawrence, the Secretary of State for India, the other two

members being Sir Stafford Cripps (of the 1942 Cripps mission fame) and A.V.Alexander. The Mission held a number of meetings with the Congress and the Muslim League and on May 16, 1946 made a set of proposals which fell short of partition of the country. The substance of the proposals was that the country would be constituted as a federal polity with residuary powers to the provinces, and the provinces would be classified into several groups depending on their geographical location and the religious complexion of the population.

The Muslim League, however reluctantly, accepted the proposals and so did the Congress, through a Congress Working Committee resolution of June 26. However Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the President of the Congress at the time, in a press conference held on July 10 in Bombay resiled from this position and declared that the Congress would enter the Constituent Assembly 'completely unfettered by agreements and free to meet all situations as they arise' ; and also that grouping of provinces, as proposed by the mission, will not work. Consequent upon this, the Muslim League on July 29 withdrew their acceptance of the Cabinet Mission proposals.

Maulana Azad[15], in his autobiography 'India Wins Freedom' has termed this act of Jawaharlal Nehru an 'astonishing statement' and one of those unfortunate events that change the course of history[16]. He also deeply regretted that on April 26, 1946, while stepping down from the Presidency of the Congress he had issued a statement proposing the name of Jawaharlal Nehru and had appealed to all Congressmen that they should elect him unanimously. He called this the greatest blunder of his political life. He goes on to say that his second mistake was not supporting Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who, had he become the Congress President, would never have committed the mistake Jawaharlal made, and which gave Jinnah the opportunity of sabotaging the Cabinet Mission plan[17]. The book was first published in 1958, after his death, but in accordance with his wishes, thirty pages of the book were withheld, to be published thirty years later. In this part of the book he writes "Jawaharlal Nehru was one of my dearest friends and his contribution to India's national life is second to none. I have nevertheless to say with regret that this was not the first time that he did immense harm to the national cause. He had committed an almost equal blunder in 1937 when the first elections were held under the Government of India Act 1935"[18]. M.C.Chagla in his autobiography has also been critical of this terrible mistake of Nehru[19]

.

Together with withdrawal of acceptance of the Cabinet Mission proposals the Muslim League also announced that August 16, 1946 will be a day of 'Direct Action' by the League in support of Pakistan. No explanation was forthcoming as to what would constitute such 'Direct Action'. An editorial in 'The Times' of London of July 30 called the Direct Action call of the Muslim League a most regrettable one. On the same day Sardar J.J.Singh of the India League of U.S.A. made an appeal to the United Nations to intervene in the matter to prevent a bloodbath.

Jawaharlal thereafter, faced with a fusillade from his partymen for having exceeded his

brief, tried to eat his words and work out a solution with Jinnah. This time however Jinnah would not budge. Viceroy Wavell asked Jawaharlal to call upon Jinnah at his house in Bombay, and try to prevail upon him. Jawaharlal did so, and again Jinnah did not budge. In fact, while on August 15 Jawaharlal was sitting with Jinnah at his house in Bombay, trying vainly to persuade him to withdraw the threat of Direct Action, Suhrawardy in Calcutta was applying the finishing touches to the plans for the morrow.

Suhrawardy in 1946 had just been installed as Premier of Bengal by Governor Burrows with whom he had a very cosy relationship. A handsome and imperious man, he openly moved around with his handpicked set of personal guard. Unbelievable as it may seem today, these were Muslim criminals, the scum of Howrah's bustees[20], Bengal's very own Hell's Kitchen. One of these, Meena Peshawari, earned special notoriety during the killings. Bhabani Prosad Chatterjee quotes Leonard Mosley as having remarked that Suhrawardy was the kind of party boss who firmly believe that a politician who can control a polling booth with his private army of goons will always be in power[21]. Ashok Mitra describes Suhrawardy as a 'rough, tough bully' compared to Nazimuddin who was said to be a very quiet, gentle person. According to Mitra Burrows was very close to Suhrawardy ; also, the British Government had decided that only a man like Suhrawardy could establish the suzerainty of the Muslim League in Bengal, and such suzerainty was in British interests[22]

.

Suhrawardy declared a public holiday on Friday, August 16. The Congress staged a walk-out in the Bengal Legislative Assembly on August 12 in protest against declaring a public holiday in response to a call by a particular political party without taking the Assembly into confidence. On August 15 an adjournment motion demanding a debate on the same question was defeated in the Bengal Legislative Council (upper house of the Provincial Legislature).

Ashok Mitra writes that when the City of Calcutta went to sleep on the night of August 15, 1946, no one, including perhaps the plotters for the 16th, could gauge what was going to happen in the next few days. However the rest of his account of the killings, written quite meticulously, indicates that on the contrary the gameplan for that day had been circulated among

Muslims of the city, at least a substantial number of them, by word of mouth. The pro-League newspaper 'Dawn' of Karachi on August 16 published an advertisement which gave a call to use of force as being the only way to achieve what the Muslims want. S.N.Usman, the Mayor of Calcutta and the Secretary of the Calcutta Muslim League circulated a leaflet in Bangla which read "Kafer! Toder dhongsher aar deri nei! Sarbik hotyakando ghotbe!" ("Infidels! Your end is not far off! There will be a massacre!"). Another pro-League newspaper 'Morning News' said in its editorial that hurting a Britisher was not only against the Bombay resolution of the League, it was also against the tenets of Islam – thus obliquely telling its readers that hurting Hindus was quite permissible[23]

.

According to Leonard Gordon, the biographer of Sarat Chandra and Subhas Chandra Bose, and Richard Lambert, a researcher of the University of Pennsylvania the pamphlet circulated by Usman, the Mayor of Calcutta read as follows : "The call to the revolt comes to us from the Qaid-e-Azam (epithet applied to Jinnah by Pakistanis - author). This is the policy for the nation of heroes (meaning Muslims) . . . . . The day for open fight, which is the greatest desire of the Muslim nation has arrived . . . . . by fighting you will go to heaven in this holy war . . . . . Let us all cry our victory to Pakistan, victory to the Muslim nation and victory to the army which has declared jihad"[24]

.

The black day began with a large public meeting of the Muslim League in the Calcutta Maidan. Stanley Wolpert writes “Major L.A. Livermore reported from his perch atop Fort William that ‘there was a curious stillness in the air’, and . . . . . .as dawn broke, ... Muslim workers from Howrah’s Jute Mills began pouring into the city headed toward Ochterlony’s needle monument for the mammoth meeting to ‘celebrate’ Direct Action day”[25]. No one from any non-Muslim press was present at the meeting. Suhrawardy and the supposedly gentle Nazimuddin both made very rabid speeches. Suhrawardy’s speech was monitored by the Army intelligence, and he is quoted by Wolpert as having said that he would see how the British could make Mr. Nehru rule Bengal. Direct Action day would prove to the first step towards the Muslim struggle for emancipation. He advised them to return home early and said . . . that he had made all arrangements with the police and the military not to interfere with them. Military intelligence patrols further noticed that the crowd included a large number of Muslim goondahs (hoodlums) and that their ranks swelled as the meeting ended. They made for the shopping centres of the town where they at once set to loot Hindu shops and houses[26]

.

According to Mitra the gathering was peaceful to begin with. A little later, however, some skirmish was noted at one end of the Maidan abutting Chowringhee, Calcutta’s main thoroughfare. Then the real bedlam started. The people who had come to attend the meeting had also come prepared to kill and loot and were suitably armed with muskets, crowbars, huge daggers and swords, large pieces of stones, and of course, the Muslim League flag. They then spread out, howling their battle cries “Allaho Akbar (God is Great), Pakistan Zindabad, Muslim League Zindabad (Long Live Pakistan and the Muslim League), Lekar Rahenge Pakistan, Ladke Lenge Pakistan (We shall achieve Pakistan by force)"[27]

.

At about 10 A.M. a gun shop on Chowringhee was looted. The mob fanned out and started setting upon Hindus all over the city. In the South Port Police area there was a small Oriya Hindu pocket in a Muslim majority area. Some three hundred of the Oriyas

were butchered in fifteen minutes[28]

. It was a patient, painstaking process in which the marauders ferreted out Hindus and killed them in cold blood, usually by stabbing or bashing their heads. For those who do not know, it is very easy to tell Hindu from Muslim. In those days any Hindu home would have some deity, and any Bengali Hindu married woman would always wear vermillion on the parting in her hair. And ultimately the acid test always remained – a Muslim male had to be circumcised. The marauders were not just goondahs or ruffians. Seemingly suave, sophisticated young men, quite a few college students among them, crazed by the spirit of Jihad, participated in the mass murders. A hapless Bengali Hindu family had just alighted from a train at Sealdah station and were trying to find their way home. The rioters caught up with them, stripped a fifteen-year-old girl to nothing, and made her stand at the crossroads in full view of the world. Not a single policeman was in sight anywhere. Then the torching began. Hindu-inhabited areas such as the southern part of Amherst Street, Bortola, Jorasanko were in flames in no time. The fires burnt right through the night, punctuated by the war-cries of “Allaho Akbar, Ladke Lenge Pakistan”. The only exception was in the Northern part of Amherst Street where people from both communities got together and stayed unmoved by the mayhem all around them. Similarly it was a few well-meaning Muslims who rescued the unfortunate teenage girl at Sealdah.

The process continued unabated the next day. An Additional Judge of Alipore Court was killed while trying to save a little boy who was fleeing for his life from the goondahs. A fruitseller in Jorasanko shot dead his neighbour’s wife. Muslim crew on the steam launches on River Hooghly rammed country craft of Hindu boatmen and drowned them. Until midmorning of this day, that is the 17th there was no sign of any policemen anywhere.

Amal Chakraborty, then about 15, and a student of Class IX in the Metropolitan Institution of Sealdah at Calcutta used to live at that time in the YMCA's Overtoun Hall at the junction of College Street and Harrison Road. From his window he observed battle lines being drawn up. The northern footpath of Harrison Road was Hindu, the southern Muslim. There were stabbings, cries for help and water, and corpses lying on the carriageway. No one removed them, and they rotted and bloated there, and Chakraborty and his fellow inmates had to live in the stench.

Suhrawardy was camping at the Control Room of the Calcutta Police at Lalbazar, busy ‘watching the situation’. No police officer had the authority to move any men without his personal orders. It is believed that some officers defied him on his face and took out their forces. Generally the police, especially the Pathan policemen specially recruited by Niaz Mohammed Khan and the Anglo-Indian sergeants showed supreme indifference to whatever was going on. It also appeared that at least a section of them were under orders to foment trouble, not prevent or stop it. As for the Army, Wolpert writes that the Brigadier in charge of Calcutta, J.P.C.Mackinlay, had ‘ordered’ his troops to be ‘confined to barracks’ that day (quotation marks Wolpert’s), and observes that thus India’s largest, most crowded and most communally volatile city was left virtually naked[29]

. The Fire Brigade worked overtime right through, but were stopped at many places by marauding Muslim mobs.

Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Tuker, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of India's Eastern Army, called the killings "unbridled savagery with homicidal maniacs let loose to kill and kill and maim and burn. The underworld was taking charge of the city . . . the police were not controlling it". Major Livermore observed that Calcutta was the battlefield of a battle between mob rule and civilisation and decency. When the 7th Worcesters and the Green Howards (both British troop formations) were called out they found College Street ablaze and the few unburnt houses and shops completely sacked, in Amherst Street the litter of mass looting, in Upper Circular Road the rubble left by the fire-bugs, on Harrison Road the cries of wounded and terrorised residents[30]

.

From the next day however, that is August 18, Suhrawardy's goons and compatriots (some of whom had nothing to do with the riots) started getting a taste of their own medicine. The lead was taken by the Hindu Kalwars (ironmongers and scrap dealers) from Bihar and U.P., who were then joined by Sikhs and Hindu Bengalis. Armed with crowbars, Kripan (the Sikh dagger), swords and other lethal weapons they set out to avenge the last two days' depredations. In this they showed an incredible ferocity that was not hitherto known to exist in them. As with Hindu dwellings, there was also widespread torching in Muslim areas. Suhrawardy was probably not prepared for any reprisals from Hindus whom he must have taken as followers of Gandhi, and therefore necessarily incapable of violence. The massacre of Muslims in retaliation therefore took him by complete surprise. It is primarily these reprisals that forced him to call a halt to the devilry that he had, by unspeakable abuse of state power, unleashed. Meanwhile the atrocities rolled on to the 19th, by which time the Hindus had more than evened the score. A senior Imperial Police officer told Ashok Mitra that on the 18th Suhrawardy was found sitting forlornly at the Lalbazar control room table, mumbling to himself 'My poor, innocent Muslims'! [31]How many people died in the killings? No official estimate is available, the reason for which is probably that the killings were started by none other than officialdom. Bhabani Prosad Chatterjee puts the figure at about five thousand, with another fifty thousand or so grievously injured. The damage to property, of course, was beyond estimation. Lord Wavell had remarked that more people lost their lives in the Calcutta Killings than in the Battle of Plassey[32] and had informed Pethick-Lawrence that the toll was 3,000 dead and 17,000 injured. Wolpert quotes unofficial claims of "as many as 16,000 Bengalis . . . murdered between August 16-20, 1946"[33]. The number of dead was presumably determined by body count, and it is here that the estimates varied, because a large number of bodies had been thrown into the River Hooghly, or in the canals that pass through the city, or were pushed into manholes. Ashok Mitra at the time was living at Chandernagore, then a French possession, about thirty-five kilometres from Calcutta, on the other bank of the River Hooghly. A colleague of his, Noor Mohammed Khan, had his wife in hospitalised at the School of Tropical Medicine at Calcutta. When Khan was beside himself with worry for his wife, Ashok Mitra with his

wife and Khan set out in his car on August 21 (his chauffeur refused to drive to Calcutta) and drove down to Calcutta over Grand Trunk Road, Willingdon Bridge, Barrackpore Trunk Road, Shyambazar five-point crossing and Central Avenue. On the way, all the way from Dunlop Bridge to the School of Tropical Medicine, he found the road littered on both sides with rotting corpses, severed limbs, and charred remains of houses, the air thick with the stench of putrefaction[34]

.

Muslim League's call for 'Direct Action' was supposed to have countrywide operation. Why, then, was Calcutta singled out? Several reasons have been suggested. Bhabani Prosad Chatterjee thinks one reason might be the fact that staging the bloodbath in Calcutta would have attracted the attention of the whole world to the might of the Muslim League, since at that time Calcutta was the most important city in India, indeed the second city in the British Empire. Another reason might be that Suhrawardy was trying to curry favour with Jinnah, and the killings gave him an opportunity to do that[35]

.

Maulana Azad remarks in his 'India Wins Freedom' : "Sixteenth August 1946 was a black day not only for Calcutta, but for the whole of India.The turn that events had taken had made it almost impossible to expect a peaceful solution by agreement between the Congress and the Muslim League.. This was one of the greatest tragedies of Indian history and I have to say with the deepest of regret that a large part of the responsibility for this development rests with Jawaharlal[36]

".

Whatever might have been the reason, there is no doubt that The Calcutta Killings of 1946 were a result of a sinister, diabolical plot hatched by some very cynical, criminal minds who thought nothing of sending a few thousands of their countrymen (including a lot of them from the community whose interests they were supposed to be protecting) to a premature end in the most ghastly manner imaginable. Jinnah, asked about the killings by a foreign news agency later in August showed no signs of regret, replying "If Congress regimes are going to suppress and persecute the Mussalmans, it will be very difficult to control disturbances"[37]

. As an example of deliberate abuse of state power to cause mass murders it compares well in intensity, though not in breadth, with the Nazi holocaust and the Killing Fields of Pol Pot in Cambodia.

Judging from the timing of the editorial in 'The Times' of London, and the appeal by J.J.Singh of the India League of U.S.A., it is clear that the plot for staging the killings could not have been unknown to the British, certainly not to Burrows or Wavell. Yet the killings were allowed to proceed unabated for the first day, and a part of the second, before Burrows decided to call the Army in. The orders of Brigadier Mackinlay, mentioned earlier, to confine British troops to their barracks, and Suhrawardy's assertion in his

Maidan speech that the police or military would not interfere with what the Muslims did, unmistakably points to a nefarious conspiracy between Suhrawardy and Burrows. The British, as the sovereign power, were certainly guilty of standing by and amusing themselves while Suhrawardy's goons stabbed and torched.

A Muslim view of the Killings has been recorded in Mizanur Rahaman's book 'Krishna Sholoi' in Bangla, meaning 'Black Sixteenth'[38]

. Mizanur Rahaman is an important contemporary literary person of Dacca, and is the editor of a trimonthly publication called Mizanur Rahamaner Patrika (Mizanur Rahaman's Magazine). His is an eyewitness account, for he was then about thirteen, and a student of class eight in Mitra Institution (Main) of Calcutta at the time, and used to live in the predominantly Hindu area of Garpar. Mizanur Rahaman cannot, by any standards, be called a particularly communal or partisan Muslim, and yet in his writing there is a constant effort to whitewash the guilt of the Muslim League in the killings. He describes a conversation between himself and some of his Hindu classmates, in which he describes the call for 'Direct Action' to be one of a strike against the British. He describes how he was caught in a crossfire of hurled brickbats between the two communities on Raja Dinendra Street in North Calcutta, and in that state was badly hit by a stick-wielding Bihari milkman. He has tried to establish that the rioting started not after Suhrawardy's Maidan speech, but early in the morning, and Muslims were casualties from the very beginning. And he has laid the blame for the riots squarely on the Bihari community of Calcutta, absolving both Bengali Hindus and Muslims from any complicity in the process.

It is very difficult to accept Mizanur's efforts in whitewashing of Suhrawardy's and Nazimuddin's misdeeds in the face of independent testimony by people like General Tuker and Major Livermore, the research done by Wolpert, and the detailed, intimate descriptions of people like Ashok Mitra. His style of describing the incidents of the fateful days is very diffuse and imprecise, and is moreover overlaid by frequent sentimentalising, with the result that it is very difficult to sift fact from observation. It is quite possibly true that the riots had started early in the morning, at least in some parts of the city, or that there were some Muslim victims among them, or that the primary role in the rioting had been taken by Bihari Gowalas (Milkmen), Kalowars (Ironmongers) and Bihari Muslims. However, to deny Suhrawardy's cardinal role in giving a murderous twist to the riots, or to deny the role of Bengali Muslims and Hindus is also equally incorrect.

On the other hand, Abul Mansur Ahmad (who was already an important Muslim politician close to Fazlul Haq) gives a different account altogether. He quotes Nazimuddin as having said that their struggle was not against the British, but against the Hindus. He also says that the murder hysteria of the Muslims had been taken to such a pitch that he was once he was asked by a friend (ordinarily a sensible, humane person) "how many Hindus have you killed? All your love for Muslims is just lip service"[39]

.

Ashok Mitra, ardent Nehru-admirer, has expressed great regret at the fact that even

after the killings were over, not to mention during them, neither Nehru nor Gandhi saw it fit to visit Calcutta. Mitra could attribute this only to the fear that any such visit immediately following the killings (in which, according to Mitra, the guilt of the Muslims was many times that of the Hindus) might have resulted in their being dubbed anti-Muslim[40]

. Thus, the observation must be made that, to the secular Congress leaders, the right or wrong of the situation was of no consequence. They would never be caught in public, so long as they could help it, saying that what the Muslims did was wrong.

Calcutta was not the only city affected by Jinnah's 'Direct Action'. Dacca, the second city of the province was equally affected, with the difference that here the Hindus were completely at the receiving end, and did not get any chance to retaliate. This author interviewed an eyewitness, Rabindra Nath Datta, a retired Insurance Executive now living in Calcutta in his modest flat at Salt Lake City. Datta is an idealist, a dynamo of energy at seventy-one, inspite of having to tend to his wife suffering from Alzheimer's, and an ardent admirer of Swami Vivekananda and Abraham Lincoln (framed photographs on his wall). He was a student at Dacca Collegiate School then, and used to live on Wyer Street in the Wari area of Dacca. This is what he had to say :

" On 16th August 1946, a large number of Hindu dwellings in Dacca were set on fire. Wari was a solidly Hindu area, and we were relatively safe, but for further safety's sake a large number of Hindus went and took refuge in the estate of Hardeo Todi. We could see the fires in the distance. Hardeo Todi was a wealthy Hindu businessman of the Marwari community who used to own a glass factory, and lived in a sprawling estate together with his sons Dhanulal and Brajlal. Hardeo gave refuge unreservedly, and there were no casualties among the Hindus of Wari.

Five or six days after the riots subsided a strange phenomenon was noticed. The atmosphere was still very tense, and very few people ventured out at night. One morning some eight or ten bloated and partially decomposed naked corpses were found to have been dumped beside the railway line running between Wari and Tikatuli. One look at the males among them (it was not easy to take that look) told one that the males were not circumcised, and were therefore Hindus. These corpses were clearly those of Hindus killed elsewhere and brought by truck during the night and dumped in the Hindu-majority areas of Tikatuli and Wari to scare the Hindus. This went on for quite a few nights. I took a photograph of the corpses. A few other boys and I formed a party to take the bodies during the day to Shyampur cremation ground and cremate them there. Meanwhile in school we were told by our Muslim fellow students that we would also have to share the fate of the corpses if we (meaning the Congress) did not concede Pakistan".

As usual, the person to rise in the most vociferous protest against this mass crime was Syama Prasad Mookerjee. A no-confidence motion was moved in the Bengal Legislative Assembly after the killings. In the debate that followed he again made a memorable

speech, lambasting Suhrawardy and his cohorts for their open incitement to mass murder, at the same time emphasizing the irresponsible self-centeredness exhibited by the resident Whites (then called Europeans) of the city. Excerpts from his speech :

"Mr. Speaker Sir, since yesterday we have been discussing the motion of no-confidence under circumstances which perhaps have no parallel in the deliberations of any Legislature in any part of the civilised world. What happened in Calcutta is perhaps without a parallel in modern history. St. Bartholomew's Day of which history records some grim events of murder and butchery pales into insignificance compared to the brutalities that were committed in the streets, lanes and bye-lanes of this first city of British India. . . . . let me say this that what had happened was not the result of a sudden explosion, but it is the culmination of an administration, corrupt, inefficient and communal which has disfigured the life of this great province. But so far as the immediate cause is concerned . . . . it is said on behalf of the Muslim League that the Cabinet Mission proved faithless to Muslim interests and thereby created a situation which had no parallel in the Anglo-Muslim relationship in the country. What did actually the Cabinet Mission do? The Muslim League, the spoilt and pampered child of the British Imperialists for the last thirty years, was disowned for the first time by the British Labour Government . . . . (Loud noise from the Government benches) . . . . When Mr. Jinnah was confronted at press conference in Bombay on the 31st July and was asked whether direct action meant violence or non-violence, his cryptic reply was 'I am not going to discuss ethics'. (The Hon. Mr. Mohammed Ali : Good.). But Khwaja Nazimuddin was not so good. He came out very bluntly in Bengal and said that Muslims did not believe in non-violence at all. Now Sir, speeches like these were made by responsible League leaders. . . . All this was followed by a series of articles and statements which appeared in the columns of Newspapers -- the Morning News, the Star of India and the Azad. If . . . my friend Mr. Ispahani . . . . reads these documents . . . he will be able to find out that there was nothing but open and direct incitement to violence. Hatred of Hindus and jehad on the Hindus was declared was declared in fire-eating language . . . and the general Moslem public have acted according to the instructions. . . . . Sir, there is one point I would like to say with regard to the Britishers in this house. My friends are remaining neutral. I cannot understand this attitude at all. If the Ministry was right (then) support them, and if the Ministry was wrong you should say so boldly and not remain neutral. Merely sitting on the fence shows signs of abject impotence. (Laughter). My friend Mr. Gladding (a leader of the European group in the house) says luckily none of his people were injured. It is true Sir, but that is a statement that makes me extremely sorry. If a single Britisher, man, or woman, or a child had been struck, they would have thrown the Ministry out of office without hesitation but because no Britisher was touched they can take an impartial and neutral view! . . . . . It is therefore vitally necessary that this false and foolish idea of Pakistan or Islamic rule has to be banished for ever from your head. In Bengal we have got to live together."

But of course reality turned out to be quite different. Pakistan was born, to be broken up a quarter of a century later. In Hindu-majority West Bengal Hindus and Muslims learnt to live together, as Syama Prasad had wanted. Muslim-majority East Bengal, as we all know

and shall see later in this book, was a different story altogether.

Now on to Noakhali from Calcutta, for the next horror. Everyone knows where Calcutta is, but very few know about Noakhali or what had made the place notorious. A few words about this forgotten corner of the world, which saw another bloodbath in 1946, would therefore be in order.

A look at the map at Fig.1 is called for. The mainstream of the holy Ganga leaves its holiness to the tiny Bhagirathi and enters present-day Bangladesh to become the ordinary but wide Podda or Padma. Padma then meets the mighty Brahmaputra (Jamuna in Bangladesh) coming from the north, and flows south-eastwards with its enormous volume of water. This combined stream is then met by the rain-fed Meghna flowing in a south-westerly direction. The river, which continues to be called Meghna beyond this confluence, then becomes virtually an inland sea, nearly twenty kilometres wide, flares out, and flows for another hundred kilometres before it meets the sea, the Bay of Bengal. The sluggish flow of this huge mass of muddy water also causes extensive siltation in and around its mouth which gives rise to formation of delta, roughly triangular islands known locally as char. Some of these chars in course of time got connected with the mainland, but their names remained.

The district of Noakhali, as it existed in the British times (all districts of undivided Bengal have since been divided up many times in independent Bangladesh - Noakhali of those days now consists of the districts of Noakhali, Lokkhipur and Feni), lay on the left flank of the combined Meghna as it was meeting the sea, and included a number of these islands or chars. It is dangerous to live on the chars as they are often less than a metre above high water level, and are the first prey to any cyclone. Nevertheless, the fertility of the soil on the chars, combined with the pressure of population on the mainland, causes many people to settle on these islands. The district was, and still is, almost totally rural and agricultural, the main produce being paddy, jute, coconut, paan(betel leaves) and supari (betel or areca nut). The district included a number of char islands, of which two – Hatia and Sandip – were quite big. Among the smaller ones were Char Alexander, Char Lawrence, Char Bele and several others. Another feature of Noakhali was its remoteness. In order to reach the district from Calcutta one had to take from Sealdah station a Broad Gauge train which would reach a steamer station called Goalondo. Then one had to take a steamer down the Padma till one reached another station called Chandpur on the Meghna near the confluence of Padma and Meghna. Then one had to board a slow Metre Gauge train which would take one via Laksam junction to Noakhali town, the district headquarters. Thereafter to reach a village or one of the chars one had to take a bullock cart or a country boat. It took nothing less than forty-eight hours to reach such a village from Calcutta. The means of transportation within the district were also primitive, being confined largely to bullock carts and country boats. Also, the district was criss-crossed by innumerable small rivers, canals and water courses, and transportation over land even by bullock carts was limited.

The population in the British days was overwhelmingly – more than eighty per cent –

Muslim. Now it is around ninety-five per cent so. The minority Hindus were largely schoolteachers, lawyers, moneylenders, doctors, shopkeepers, small businessmen, artisans and the like. A few were small Zamindars. The Muslims were largely cultivators, the majority of them sharecroppers or landless agricultural labourers. On the whole the Hindus were financially somewhat better off than the Muslims. It is this financial disparity that was made use of by the Hindu-baiters in the run-up for the carnage. There was another disparity – not economic, not political, not social. It was the fact that Hindu women were considered prettier than their Muslim sisters, and being in the minority, and infidels at that, were considered fair game. This is not being facetious. Words to this effect were spoken by no less a person than Sir Frederick Burrows, Governor of Bengal, when the widespread incidents of molestation, kidnapping and rape of Hindu women in Noakhali were reported to him[41]

.

The carnage at Noakhali was begun by a Muslim League leader called Ghulam Sarwar assisted by a Moulvi (Muslim Priest) Rashid Ahmed and a Mukhtar (Lawyer) Majibar Rahman. Sarwar was a fire-breathing rabble-rouser from a Peer's (Muslim holy man) family who had lately wrested the leadership of the Krishak Samiti (Cultivators' Association) from milder leaders such as Khan Bahadur Abdul Gofran. Once begun, the violence gathered its own momentum and rolled on. The inspiration of course came from Suhrawardy's launching of the Calcutta Killings (including the Hindu reprisals), and the assurance that under Suhrawardy's benign rule and Burrows's indifference the police could be trusted to look the other way while Muslim plundered Hindu. In fact that is what happened in the Calcutta Killings, and that is what would have continued to happen, had not the tide of rioting turned against the Muslims. There was no such fear in Noakhali. The overwhelming numerical majority of Muslims, and the remoteness of the area would ensure that there would be no retaliation, nor any official action in a hurry.

Sarwar's motivation in starting the carnage was simple, and remarkably similar to Suhrawardy's. Just as Suhrawardy wanted to curry favour with Jinnah and elevate himself to a National Level, so did Sarwar want to curry favour with Suhrawardy and raise himself to Provincial Level. He had won the 1937 elections on a Muslim League ticket, but had been refused a ticket by the League in 1946. He was determined to show his political bosses that he deserved a ticket. He began with touring the district, making rabid speeches and provoking isolated incidents of harrassment of Hindus, outraging the modesty of Hindu women, even killing. The Hindus looked for help from the Congress, but predictably, no help came. They then turned to the Hindu Mahasabha. Syama Prasad immediately promised them help, and came to Noakhali town and held a mammoth rally of Hindus at Arun School grounds. If this did not instil any confidence among the Hindus, it at least drew the attention of the District Administration to the fact that something sinister was in the offing.

Meanwhile Sarwar went round making his speeches. Just how provocative these speeches were can be made out only by a person who understands the Noakhali dialect (a lot of Bengalis, even East Bengalis, do not). Dr. Dinesh Chandra Sinha (b.1935), a

retired Deputy Registrar of the Calcutta University, is himself a fugitive from Noakhali, and now lives near Calcutta. Dr. Sinha has quoted the main points of the speeches verbatim in the dialect in his work 'Noakhalir Mati o Manush'[42]

. An English translation is given below, with the caveat that it can never capture the explosive potential of the words.

1. Brothers, all the rice that you grow – who eats it? – Hindus!
2. Brothers, all the fat bananas that you grow – who eats them? – Hindus!
3. Brothers, when our women fall ill who paw and feel them all over? – Hindu doctors!
4. Brothers, why are we Muslims thin and underfed? – because we do not get enough to eat!
5. Brothers, why are the Hindus fat and greasy? – because they get all the best things to eat!

These are lies of course, however much one might want to see the struggle between the haves and have-nots in them. The twenty per cent Hindus of Noakhali could never eat up even a quarter of the rice and bananas that the eighty per cent Muslims grew. The bulk of the Hindus, who were mostly either in the white-collar professions or small tradesmen or artisans could be only marginally better off than their Muslim brethren. The third allegation is particularly provocative, for obvious reasons.

These words were very similar to those that unemployed ruffians and goons used to go around preaching, in a country far away from Noakhali and Calcutta. These ruffians and goons had names like Heinrich Himmler, Hermann Goering, Ernst Roehm, Alfred Rosenberg, Julius Streicher, Gregor Strasser ; and they were led by an discharged Austrian corporal called Adolf Hitler. The name of the country was Germany of the Weimer Republic, the time was in the nineteen-twenties, and the people about whom all this was said were called Jews, whose only fault was that they minded their own business and prospered while doing so. Nobody paid the goons any attention, and the Austrian corporal eventually became the Head of the German state. Rather similarly, the Congress or the rest of the country did not pay attention to what was happening in Noakhali. What happened in Germany thereafter was the War and the Holocaust about which everyone knows ; what happened in Noakhali was the Carnage which even the victims' children do not know of.

The carnage began on October 10, 1946, the full moon night of Kojagari Lokkhi (Lakshmi) Puja when Bengali Hindus traditionally worship Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. Sarwar and other League leaders had already created the necessary atmosphere by moving from village to village, making inflammatory speeches to the congregations at the daily prayers, describing in vivid detail what the Hindus had done to the Muslims during the Calcutta Killings, duly skipping the other part. As with the Calcutta Killings, elaborate arrangements had been made beforehand to ensure the success of the operation. The hinterland was cut off from Noakhali town by breaking the Sanko-s (one-pole bamboo

bridges crossing canals). The boatmen in country boats were all Muslim. There was no way a Hindu could get away once the killings started. Still, to make doubly sure, Muslim League volunteers guarded all routes leading to railway stations.

There were qualitative differences with the Calcutta Killings. In Calcutta the intention of the marauders appeared to be primarily to loot and kill, or at least maim. In Noakhali the objective seemed to kill selectively, but mainly to rape and convert forcibly and to desecrate Hindu places of worship. The process was begun as usual with the familiar slogans of Nara-e-Takbir, Allaho Akbar, Pakistan Zindabad, Ladke Lenge Pakistan, Marke Lenge Pakistan, Malauner Rokto Chai (We want the blood of infidels). The areas attacked were Ramganj, Begumganj, Lokkhipur, Raipur, Senbag, Sandip, and some of the adjoining areas of Tipperah district. The atrocities then spread to Karpara, Narayanpur, Shaistanagar, Gopairbag, Noakhola, Gobindapur, Nandigram, Dalalbazar, Panchgaon, Sahapur and many other places.[43]

The attackers had organised themselves into parties each of which they gave the fancy name of Fouj (Army). There were several of them, such as Mian's Fouj (led by Ghulam Sarwar himself), Akbar's Fouj, Qasem's Fouj, and so on. The task of these Fouj-s – a few thousand bloodthirsty, Jihad-crazed peasants surging forward to kill, rape and forcibly convert a few hopelessly outnumbered victims – would be the envy of any army in the world.

The story of the escape of Nalini Ranjan Mitra (1892-1978), a schoolteacher of the village of Khilpara and a Hindu Mahasabha leader, from sure death at the hands of Sarwar's goons is quite hair-raising and has been described in Dr. Sinha's Noakhalir Mati o Manush (The Land and the People of Noakhali) in graphic detail. This escape was made possible only by the goodwill and ready wit of two illiterate Muslim youths. Likewise, a number of Hindu lives were saved by Muslims, although their continued security could not be guaranteed, and eventually all of them were forced to leave for Hindu-majority West Bengal. A shortened and abridged version of Dr. Sinha's account, as heard from Mitra and his son Usha Ranjan Mitra, appearing in Bangla in his book[44]

, is given below:

Nalini Ranjan Mitra was at the time teaching at Khilpara (Noakhali) school which he had himself founded. He declared the Puja holidays for the school and came home to his home village of Sindurpur (also in Noakhali). Sindurpur was about four miles from Advocate Rajendra Lal Roy Chaudhuri's house in Karpara. Roy Chaudhuri was the President of the district Hindu Mahasabha. Ghulam Sarwar had a hit list in which Nalini Mitra's name figured just below that of Roy Chaudhuri. Nalini came to know upon reaching home that the entire extended family of Roy Chaudhuri, some twenty-six of them, had been butchered on October 11. He immediately set out with his wife Shobhonabala and the rest of his family in a boat manned by a boatman he knew very well, bound for the village of Dadpur, where Shobhonabala's brothers lived and where the bedlam had not yet started. A little while later they heard shouts 'There, there, Nalini master is running away – catch him'."

What followed was a nightmare. A bloodthirsty mob came running and caught and fastened their boat. The family was saved from being butchered by the ready wit of a well-meaning Muslim peasant Qadir Ali, who pacified the mob by saying that there was no point in killing Nalini right away, he could be kept incarcerated in his home, until orders from Ghulam Sarwar were received. The family was sent back home.

That night it rained very heavily and there were no further raids. The family held a council of war and decided that the only way for Nalini to be saved was for him to go to Nandigram, a nearby village where a police platoon had camped. This itself was a very tall order, because to go to Nandigram Nalini would have to penetrate the seige thrown by Muslims all around his house. However, there was no alternative. Nalini therefore set out dressed as a Muslim for Nandigram, accompanied by Ramesh Das, a Hindu Barui (paan or betel leaf cultivator) and a Muslim called Ali. One advantage at the time was that the jute and paddy fields were all flooded and covered with fully grown plants. The jute plants grew at least five feet above the water and provided excellent cover. Ramesh and Ali left Nalini on the edge of a jute field and returned home by daybreak.

By that time the weather had improved and a raiding party arrived. They ransacked the house but could not find Nalini. One of the Muslims who had been laying seige the previous night meanwhile let it out that they had seen Ali, Ramesh and an unknown Muslim that night going out into the rain. The raiders immediately understood that Nalini has escaped and ran for the jute fields. By that time Nalini was nowhere near Nandigram. The raiders surrounded the fields and, shouting Allahu Akbar started combing the fields. Nalini lay hidden in the jute fields with just the tip of his nose above the water. In this state he lay still, for more than a day without food, with only the turbid and stinking water of the jute field to drink, bitten black and blue all over by insects, lacerated by the sharp edges of the plants, while the raiders watched for tell-tale signs of movements in the jute plants. Finally in the dead of night he managed to reach the house of the Pal family at the edge of the same village. This family had saved themselves by converting en masse to Islam. The Pals hid Nalini in a loft. The raiders came to search the Pal household a number of times but Nalini managed to stay hidden. After about four or five days Ramesh and Ali arrived at the Pal household and again in the dead of the night escaped with the half-dead Nalini to the police camp at Nandigram. Upon reaching the camp he fell unconscious, and thus he lay for more than twenty-four hours. Meanwhile the raiders, on a suspicion, killed Ramesh and mercilessly beat up Ali, but still continued with their search until a partially decomposed headless torso was found floating in a jute field. They then took this to be Nalini's body and called off their search.

The entire family of Nalini was forced to convert to Islam. The men were driven to offer Namaz at the local Mosque. The women were placed under purdah and forbidden to come out. A group of Moulvis came and changed the names of the family members. A girl called Niru was named Nurjahan, Monu was named Mumtaz. The women were told to hold one end of a piece of cloth which passed out below the curtain (purdah). The other end was held by the Moulvis who recited verses from the Quran and the Haadis.

Meanwhile Nalini convinced the police at Nandigram to conduct a raid on Sindurpur to rescue his family. By this time the Police had been reinforced by a Military Contingent. All Hindu families who had been forcibly converted into Islam were rescued and taken to Choumuhani. They all renounced their conversion to become Hindus again. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee had meanwhile set up a Relief Committee at Choumuhani and Nalini busied himself in this relief work. Nalini eventually, like everyone else, moved to West Bengal and became the Headmaster of Nangi High School near Batanagar in the district of South 24-Parganas. Nangi, incidentally, was and still is a Muslim majority area. It must also be mentioned that Nalini later got a letter from his Muslim students of Khilpara, regretting the incident and urging him to come back.

Louis Fischer, the American journalist, describes the Noakhali carnage thus[45]

: "Mr. Arthur Henderson told the House of Commons on Nov 4, 1946 that the dead in Noakhali and contiguous Tipperah districts had not yet ben counted, but will, according to estimates, be low in the three figures category. The Bengal government put the number of casualties at 218; some families, however, hid their victims out of fear. Over ten thousand houses were looted in the two districts. In Tipperah 9,895 persons were forcibly converted to Islam ; in Noakhali ineaxact data suggested that the number of converts was greater. Thousands of Hindu women were abducted and married to Muslims against their will. . . . to convert Hindu women, Muslims broke their bangles and removed their 'happiness marks' on their foreheads which showed that they were not widows. Hindu men were compelled to grow beards, to twist their loincloths the Muslim way instead of the Hindu way, and to recite the Quran. Stone idols were smashed and Hindu temples desecrated. Worst of all, Hindus were made to slaughter their cows if they had any, or in any case to eat meat. It was felt that the Hindu community would not accept back into its fold one who had killed the sacred beast or partaken of its flesh."

In fact, one of the very few good things to have come out of the unmitigated evil of the carnage was the fact that the Hindus who had been forced to eat beef, or Hindu women who had been raped or brutalised by Muslims, were indeed accepted back into the Hindu fold. Rabindra Nath Datta had journeyed to villages in the far interior of the district with Gandhi's entourage. Here he had found Hindus in such a stage of demoralisation as to be reduced to the level of animals. Some of them had been tied up and incarcerated in huts. Most of the young, and even some middle-aged women had been raped and brutalised , some of them in the presence of the local Muslim womenfolk. Some men, including little children, had been killed. A common method of disposing of the latter was to toss them into a pond. All of them had been forcibly converted. Datta asked them to come with him so that they could be rehabilitated. Most of them were very sceptical about such rehabilitation as they had been made to eat beef and their womenfolk had been touched by the Muslims. Datta was prepared for this and had carried several copies of a booklet published by the Ramakrishna Mission. The booklet quoted a number of venerable Hindu religious and scriptural authorities emphatically saying that people subjected to forcible conversion, molestation and eating of forbidden food could come back to the Hindu fold without any difficulty. With this he

had persuaded them to come with him (in this connection see Syama Prasad Mookerjee's remarks below and endnote on Prayashchitta). The local Muslims did not object, because the Hindus' departure would mean their property being available for grabbing.

Syama Prasad Mookerjee toured the affected areas of Noakhali and Tipperah districts and made a statement in Bangla which is quoted in Dr. Sinha's Noakhalir Mati o Manush[46]

. A freely translated version of the same is given below. "What happened in Noakhali and Tipperah have certain features which have no parallels in the history of communal riots in India. The Carnage at Noakhali was, of course, not a communal riot in any sense. It was a planned and concerted attack by the majority on the minority (the name for this in Eastern Europe, when practised against the Jews, was 'Pogrom' – Author). The central purpose of this attack was to effect mass looting, conversion and total desecration of Hindu temples and deities. Killing was mainly for the influential Hindus and for those who resisted the rampage. Rape and kidnapping of Hindu women was an essential part of the plan. From the slogans used in the attacks it is clear that the design was to cleanse the district totally of Hindus, and to establish Pakistan. The attackers were all Muslim League supporters and knew that it was their own Government which was ruling at Calcutta. This had emboldened them in their task to a very considerable extent.

It is not a fact that this pogrom was the act of a few hoodlums or that they had all came from somewhere far away. Practically all the atrocities were committed by local Muslims and the Muslim population of the district was generally sympathetic to what they were doing. There were a few exceptions among the Muslims who had managed to save Hindu lives. Their number is negligible. The Hindus who had been saved in this manner but who had not been able to run away have all been forcibly converted. Those who have run away have been looted of all their belongings. That such a carnage was in the offing had been brought to the notice of the district administration repeatedly and well in time, but the administration took no steps against the persons who were inciting hatred. These administrators have proved themselves to be totally unfit to hold their posts. So long as they continue in their posts it would be very difficult to restore peace in the district. After such a calamity only some fifty persons in Noakhali and a few in Tipperah have so far been arrested. Thousands of people have run away from their homes with only the clothes on their backs. They are now housed at camps at Comilla, Chandpur, Agartala and a few other places. The total number of such destitutes would be somewhere between 50,000 and 75,000.

Apart from these people another 50,000 or so are still marooned in areas where the administration has no say. These people need to be rescued immediately. They have all been forcibly converted. Their belongings have been looted, their spirit is broken. They are hardly human beings any more. Their names have been changed, their women have been ravished. They are being forced to wear Muslim clothes. The men have to attend mosques. The women are given religious instructions at home by Moulvis. All steps are being taken to ensure that they are totally cut off from their moorings and made to

surrender completely to their tormentors.

They have lost the courage to even protest. They dare not meet any Hindus from outside who come to visit them unless they are with armed guards. Handbills are being printed in the names of influential Hindus in both their Hindu and Muslim names which say that they have wilfully embraced Islam. They are being forced to write to the Sub-divisional Officers to that effect. They can leave their villages only with the written permission of the local Muslim leaders. A few of them managed to meet me at Choumuhani near Noakhali and told their heartrending tales.

The immediate task at hand is to rescue the minorities who are still marooned, and completely in the clutches of the majority community. Until recently the rioters had kept the villages inaccessible by cutting off the means of communication. This has now partially been set right by the Military, but just access is not enough. Our volunteers will have to visit the villages to restore the morale and confidence of the thousands of Hindus.

It is a welcome development that the Military have decided to visit each and every village. They must remove certain officials from these villages, failing which they will find it very difficult to do any work. Punitive taxes must also be imposed. Such taxes were imposed on Hindus alone during the 1942 movement. This time punitive taxes upon the Muslims alone would be in order as they have not been able to give protection to the Hindu minority. When I discussed this aspect with officials I was told that there were a lot of Muslims who had helped the Hindus. I propose that if any Muslim can produce sufficient proof that he had helped the Hindus then he may be exempted. The destitute Hindus must be compensated from the money realised by way of punitive taxes and also from general funds.

Rehabilitation must be taken in hand immediately. Harvesting time is near. Those who have been ousted from their homes may not get their share of the harvest, in which case they will have nothing to eat. In order to be rehabilitateted the Hindus must be made to feel secure. They must be housed in temporary camps for the present until their homes and temples in their villages are rebuilt and their deities are reinstalled. This alone will restore their morale.

I do not accept that so many brothers and sisters of ours who had been forced out of the Hindu fold have left that fold. They were born Hindus, they are still Hindus, and they shall die Hindus. I have said this to all and sundry: there cannot be any question of any Prayashchitta (atonement for sins[47]

) for them to come back to the Hindu fold. There shall be no talk of any Prayashchitta.

Any woman rescued from a disturbed area and found to have been forcibly married to a Muslim shall go back to her family. All unmarried women and girls should be given in marriage as far as possible. Hindu society must get out of this horror with a clear sight and a view of the future. Else, its future is dark.

I have constituted committees for rescue, assistance, and rehabilitation at Noakhali and Choumuhani. Ten groups of five volunteers each, together with armed escorts, will shortly leave for the affected areas.

I make this statement only upon observing a small part of East Bengal. What we have seen and heard have no parallels in civilised society. There are disturbances and tension in many other parts of Bengal, including Calcutta. The administration has practically collapsed, for which the Governor and the Provincial cabinet are squarely responsible. We have warned them repeatedly, but with no effect. We can clearly foresee that lawlessness will get worse if these people continue in the administration.

In this hour of its peril Hindu society will have to realise something very important : it must stand unified, or else it will perish. It is perhaps God's will that from this destruction the reawakening of Hindus will begin.

We are not to forget, at this hour of darkness, that we are 30 million Hindus living in Bengal. If we organise ourselves, and if at least some of us dare to brave all odds with resolution and without fear then we shall be able to vanquish our enemies and restore our rightful position in our motherland".

The Noakhali carnage came to be widely known because of Gandhi's famous visit to the district. Gandhi arrived at Choumuhani on November 7, 1946, almost a month after the carnage began and stayed in Noakhali till February 1947. Even before this, as information about the atrocities began to trickle out, well-meaning people from all over Bengal flocked to the district, wanting 'to do something', generally to give relief to the affected families. Of these the efforts of Syama Prasad Mookerjee have already been mentioned. Mrs. Ashoka Gupta, wife of Saibal Gupta of the ICS, was at that time at Chittagong, quite close to Noakhali. Nellie Sengupta[48] was at that time also at Chittagong and convened a meeting on October 26 to organise women's teams for relief work at Noakhali in which Ashoka joined. A number of leaders accompanied Gandhi, others came along to join him. Among the prominent people who congregated in remote Noakhali then there were Acharya J.B.Kripalani and his wife (and a prominent congresswoman in her own right) Sucheta Kripalani, Sarat Chandra Bose, Surendra Mohan Ghosh, Muriel Lister, A.V.Thakkarbapa, and others. Among these Ashoka Gupta has recorded some of the reminiscences in a short volume entitled Noakhalir Durjoger Diney (During the Dark Days in Noakhali)[49]Descriptions of atrocities recorded by Ashoka Gupta fall in the familiar pattern: pillage, rape, forcible conversion, occasional killing. A Hindu widow's only means of livelihood was a cow. Her house was burnt down, the cow was slaughtered, and she was forced to eat the beef. Among the victims a large number of people were from the depressed classes – known then as Harijan and today in India as Scheduled Castes. A.V.Thakkarbapa, a longtime adherent of Gandhi, was the General Secretary of the Delhi branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, and had previous experience in relief work. His experience in the villages of Char Mandal and Char Ruhita have been recorded by Ashoka Gupta[50]

. Most of the Hindu houses in the two villages had been either torched or looted. Two thousand people had been forcibly converted, six girls forcibly married to Muslims, one person was killed. Thakkarbapa noticed that even six weeks after the atrocities ended people still wanted to flee their villages. A major reason for their insecurity was the attitude of the Police Stations. The police would either not record complaints or would threaten or harrass those who came to complain.

Ashoka Gupta's personal experience[51] was identical. Months after the atrocities, the Hindus were still deathly scared to speak out. As she was crossing a river in a ferryboat, a Hindu pointed at the Muslim boatman wearing a Red Cross armband and whispered that this very man was the leader of a bloodthirsty mob. She had somehow convinced a tormented young Hindu couple to come to Lokkhipur police station to record a complaint. The wife pulled a long ghomta[52]

over her face and said, between sobs, that even two months after the riots were over, two or three Muslims came to their home every night, took her away and returned her early in the morning. The police officer asked for their names. The husband replied that telling their names would mean sure death for him. Was there any other way in which they could be saved from this unbearable state? Of course there was none, and the couple had to flee their village.

At Mojupur village two orphaned babies, a boy and a girl, were being brought up by their Mama (mother's brother) and his wife, a childless and well-to-do couple. Their house was first looted, then they were asked to convert. When they refused they were set on fire alive, along with their belongings. Meanwhile news had reached Lokkhipur thana, where the District Magistrate McInnerny[53] happened to be present. He rushed to Mojupur with his force. The couple by then were near their end. The last words they said to McInnerny was to save the two babies. McInnerny handed over the babies to Ashoka. She sent the boy to Prabartak Sangha in Chittagong, but had to send the girl away to Comilla[54]

.

Sucheta Kripalani[55] once brought to the notice of McInnerny an incident of a kidnapped Hindu girl living as a daughter-in-law in a Muslim household. McInnerny met the family with his police force in the presence of Sucheta. The head of the family said that this was a marriage out of love between his son and the girl, there had been no force used. McInnerny sent for the girl. She seemed very broken and unable to talk, but she told McInnerny by gestures that she was here of her own free will. Sucheta asked McInnerny to take the girl aside and question her. McInnerny said that was hardly necessary, since this seemed to be a simple case of love followed by marriage. Sucheta burst out "Please Mr. McInnerny, please give me one case of love affair between the communities from 10th October to this day, after the riots. This is not a case of love marriage. Take evidence in a separate room so that the girl can speak the truth". McInnerny relented and took her to a room separately. As soon as the girl was alone

with McInnerny she fell on his feet howling, begging to be rescued. At Sucheta's insistence McInnerny had to take the girl away immediately[56]

.

According to Rabindra Nath Datta, Ghulam Sarwar had it put out that whoever could rape Sucheta Kripalani would be honoured with the title of 'Ghazi' (Hero). For this reason Sucheta carried a capsule of cyanide on her while she was in Noakhali.

Datta had further heard that Rai Sahib Nagendra Kumar Sur, a leading lawyer of the Noakhali district bar, was kidnapped, taken to a lonely spot, and asked to dig his own grave. He had the guts to ask his tormentors why he should oblige them, since he was going to be killed anyway. They replied that if Sur dug the grave he would be beheaded in one stroke, but if he refused he would be tortured to death. Sur is said to have obliged them. His son Prasanta Kumar Sur fled to West Bengal, became a prominent Communist politician, Mayor of Calcutta and a Minister in the Government of West Bengal. This author had occasion to meet him and his son several times. At no point of time, either in public or in private, did he mention the death of his father. In this connection the reasons for Hindus to hide the atrocities committed on them are relevant, and these have been described and discussed in Chapter 10.

Ashoka did not find the slightest signs of remorse among the local Muslim population. To them Gandhi and the entourage had come to help only the Hindus. A Moulvi told her 'You have come simply to help the Hindus. What do you care about the poor Muslims[57]'? Ashoka retorted that they had given sarees to poor Muslim women who did not seem to have one intact saree to wear, but the Moulvi was not impressed. At one point of time, near Dalalbazar, their Jeep got stuck in the soft soil of the new road embankment built out of 'test relief' funds. The Muslim workmen who were still working on that stretch of road refused to help out[58]. Bakul Guha Roy (later Mrs. Ganguly), a Hindu woman social worker and an associate of Ashoka, was on the way to Noakhali, and at Chandpur steamer station, in order to get to know the rural folk, went ahead to meet some rural families (all Muslims) along the riverbank. They were roundly abused, and generally received very badly. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh (longtime associate of Gandhi, first Chief Minister of West Bengal 1947-48, and again 1968-69) who was escorting them told them, after they came back crestfallen, that he had let them go only to let them find out for themselves what sort of odds they were up against[59]

.

One small voice of conscience heard among the Muslim Leaguers must be mentioned. This was that of Mr. Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Labour Minister in Suhrawardy's ministry. In one of Gandhi's prayer meetings at Choumuhani on November 7, 1946 he roundly condemned the misdeeds of the Muslim goons, and has been reported in Sinha's Noakhalir Mati o Manush.[60]

Parts of his speech made on the occasion, freely translated, are quoted below.

". . . . I have myself toured the areas and spoken to the affected people. There is no denying that over a wide area, stretching from Ramganj to parts of Chandpur subdivision of Tipperah to Begumganj, there has been widespread violence and torture practised on Hindus. Hindus have been forcibly converted to Islam, they have been forced to wear lungis and round caps, their names have been changed, their women have been ravished. . . . . It has been said that the poor Muslims avenged their persecution by the Hindu Zamindars. If that is so then why was it necessary to convert them forcibly? In Noakhali there was no killing by the communities of each other ; there was just the killing of the minority Hindus by the majority Muslims."

Addressing the Hindus Mr. Shamsuddin said " There is no denying that you have been subjected to Zulm (or Julum, meaning use of force to achieve an improper objective). Islam does not teach Zulm. No one can be converted to Islam by Zulm. Those who have been forcibly converted have not really been converted at all. . . . . It is the duty of every right-thinking Muslim to persuade the Hindus of his village to come back and get rehabilitated there". This speech of Mr. Shamsuddin was very adversely commented upon by the pro-Muslim League newspaper Azad.

How did those in faraway New Delhi view the incidents in remote, inaccessible Noakhali? V.P.Menon, considered to be one of the architects of the transfer of power from British to Indian or Pakistani hands, writes : " In about the second week of October 1946, there was large scale outbreak of lawlessness and hooliganism in the Noakhali and Tipperah districts of East Bengal. Large forces of armed police and military had to be employed to control the situation. The loss of life was not great, but the loss of property was considerable. Referring to these disturbances, a prominent politician, who himself hailed from East Bengal reported that whereas the lawlessness had been given the colour of pure goondaism, it was in fact not so ; it was an organised attack engineered by the Muslim League and carried out with the connivance of administrative officials (this is what would have been termed today as Human Rights Violation – author). The attacks, he said, were made by people armed with guns and other deadly weapons; roads were dug up and other means of communication cut off to prevent ingress and egress ; canals had been blocked and strategic points were being guarded by armed insurgents. Two of the Muslim League's nominee to the interim Government were openly indulging in belligerent speeches. One of them went so far as to declare that the events in East Bengal were but part of the all-India battle for Pakistan"[61]

.

Gandhi's trip to Noakhali brought the obscure area to the front page of every newspaper of the country, and is still celebrated as one of the great journeys undertaken by the apostle of peace to restore sanity among his fellow human beings. Now the time has come to ask a few critical questions. What did Gandhi attempt? And with what success?

His mission was to restore confidence in the Hindus so that they could come back to their villages, and his method, according to him, was abiding, endless love for one's fellow men. He chalked up a very punishing schedule for himself in visiting remote villages to

hold prayer meetings there and kept it, moving over the very difficult terrain on foot at an incredible speed from strangely named hamlets like Toomchar and Qazirkhil to Atakhora and Lamchar. He had told Ashoka Gupta and others at the very beginning of their project : “Bear no ill-will towards anyone. Work without fear, mix intimately with the villagers. Success will come your way only if you remain completely fearless, stay on the path of truth, inspire confidence in the weak. The rioters will respect you only when they see true fearlessness in you, not any fake bravado[62]

.

Louis Fischer, the American journalist who described Gandhi as something of a combination of Jesus Christ and Tammany Hall[63], had covered the Noakhali carnage quite extensively in his biography of Gandhi[64]. He described the journey of the Mahatma theorugh Noakhali as a pilgrimage of penance, in which the pilgrim wears no shoes. Sometimes hostile elements, obviously Muslim Leaguers, strewed broken glass, brambles and filth in his path. He was once sitting on the floor of a hut in the midst of Muslims and discoursing on the beauties of non-violence. Sucheta Kripalani passed him a note saying that the man on his right had killed a number of Hindus. The Mahatma smiled and went on speaking. In the village of Palla, on January 27th, he was asked "What should a woman do if she is attacked? Should she commit suicide"? His prescription was in the affirmative[65]

.

Not one word about bringing the guilty to book. Instead he was advising rape victims to kill themselves!

Did Gandhi succeed in his mission? The simple answer seems to be a big NO. Can anyone succeed in convincing a large populace that they did wrong upon the minorities, when what they did is sanctioned by their religion in the name of Jihad[66]? His central purpose was to get the Hindus back to their villages in Noakhali where they would, if he had his way, live happily ever after in perfect harmony with the majority community, the Muslims. Did it happen? No, of course not, the good intentions and deeds of a large number of sensible Muslims notwithstanding. In 1946 while he was touring the district, Muslim Leaguers en masse excreted on the route that he was due to take, and also spread glass shards, nails and similar objects to make his journey difficult. Today, in 1999, fifty-two years after partition, and twenty-eight years after the formation of independent Bangladesh, there are practically no Hindus in what used to be the district of Noakhali in British India. The number of Hindus in that Noakhali used to be 411,291 as against 1,608,337 Muslims, namely 18 per cent,[67] while the percentage of Hindus in the land mass today known as Bangladesh was around 28 per cent. Today it is about 5% according to 1991 census, taking together the present-day Noakhali, Feni and Lokkhipur zillas (districts) of Bangladesh. The proportion of Hindus in the whole of Bangladesh is currently 10.5%.

Therefore Gandhi, the apostle of peace, advocate of universal love and brotherhood

failed and Ghulam Sarwar, the sectarian, murderous loudmouth, succeded. This is not an isolated case of failure. Gandhi succeeded in packing the British off, but failed in every case where it was his intention to establish Hindu-Muslim amity. The case of his espousal of the Khilafat movement has already been mentioned. He could not prevent the recurrence of riots that rocked the country since the 1920s, culminating in the Punjab bloodbath of 1947-8. He could not prevent the partition of the country nor the expulsion of Hindus and Sikhs from what became Pakistan – total and one-time expulsion in the case of West Pakistan, partial and gradual in the case of the East. All that he could prevent was the reciprocal expulsion of Muslims from India (and that too not in Punjab). This is being mentioned as a matter of fact, without comment on the right and wrong of it. He failed in convincing the Muslims, where they were in a majority, that it was their duty to protect the Hindu minority. And he failed in all these cases because he was in gross error in regard to the basic nature of Hindu-Muslim relationship in India.

What was Gandhi's error? The error was twofold : first, not being able to appreciate the significance of Jihad in the Islamic code ; and secondly, inability to foresee what a superbly skilful and powerful politician like Jinnah could do, and actually did, with the Muslim masses by wielding this aspect of the Islamic code, and the powerlessness of his own code of Ahimsa, love and non-violence, or passive resistance in the face of Jinnah's brand of politics (see Chapter 11 for further treatment of this aspect). The Indian habit of deification of a great man has not let the nation comprehend the enormity of Gandhi's failure.

Perhaps Gandhi alone understood it, because he was truly a great politician, and he died a very sad man in partitioned India.

About Jinnah's emergence as the unquestioned leader of the Muslim masses towards the end of the nineteen-thirties, the eminent historian R.C. Majumdar had this to say[68]: "His (Jinnah's) clarion call to the Muslims went home and changed the Muslim political outlook almost overnight. He touched the chord of religious feelings of Muslims which have always proved a potent factor in Muslim politics". The Mullahs in the countryside were soon up in arms against the Congress propagandists . . . . It was blasphemy, they told their flocks, to say that politics is a purely secular affair, and they reawakened in them all their old suspicions of Hindu intentions towards their faith.' The Congress mass contact movement, which had made some headway, collapsed under the attack of the Mullahs. The Congress made frantic attacks to counteract Jinnah's propaganda and passed resolutions guaranteeing full rights to the minorities, assuring them of the widest possible scope for developing in the fullest measure their political economic and cultural life along with the other elements of the nation and asking the Muslims to cooperate with the Congress for the common good and the advancement of the people of India. But all these fell on deaf ears".

What people like Jinnah, Suhrawardy and Sarwar were trying to do was the same as what the Confederates did when they fired upon Fort Sumter in South Carolina in the faraway

United States of America. They were trying to wage a Civil War. Meanwhile Gandhi and Nehru were happy in their pet perception that their party, the great Indian National Congress, represented Hindus and Muslims alike, that the Muslim League was an aberration and therefore its appeal could not last. They were lulled into a very strong belief in this perception by the results of the 1937 election. Therefore they not only underestimated the strength but mistook the very nature of their adversary and his designs. They were also in basic error regarding the Hindu-Muslim relationship in India, as has been explained earlier.

A Civil War cannot be won with love and non-violence, especially when those waging the war did not suffer from a bad conscience for having done so. Gandhi's Ahimsa or non-violence succeeded against the British because the latter always had among themselves some people who genuinely believed that the British in India were in the wrong, and in the process gave their whole British nation a bad conscience about India. Add to that the facts that the West had a tradition of Rule of Law and Libertarianism and also that Britain already had had a similar problem with the Irish in the very recent past, and it is not difficult to see why Gandhi's non-violence succeeded against them. After all, Non-Violence and Civil Disobedience were ideas that Gandhi got from the writing of a liberal western thinker, Henry David Thoreau of Walden Pond, Massachusetts. In this regard it is useful to recall what Henry Kissinger had remarked “In my view, India had survived its turbulent history through an unusual subtlety in grasping and then manipulating the psychology of foreigners. The moral pretensions of the Indian leaders (during and before the Bangladesh liberation) seemed to me perfectly attuned to exploit the guilt complexes of a liberal, slightly socialist West; they were indispensable weapons for an independence movement that was physically weak and that used the ethical categories of the colonial power to paralyse it.”[69]

On the other hand, Jinnah, Suhrawardy and Sarwar were not Westerners or foreigners, and the subtlety that Kissinger had observed among Indians in dealing with foreigners was not in evidence here. Moreover, these gentlemen had no problems of bad conscience like the British, because their conduct was endorsed by the inviolable religious doctrine of Jihad. Gandhi's non-violence would not have lasted half an hour against Aurangzeb, or the present-day Taliban of Afghanistan, and it did not last against Jinnah, Suhrawardy or Sarwar.

Likewise, Lincoln's opponents were fired with the idea of "Cotton, Slavery and States' Rights", and did not for a moment stop to think that African-Americans were human and slavery was evil, or that there was anything wrong in wrecking their Union. Lincoln, therefore, did not wait to convince the Confederates through negotiations or lofty moralising. He sent forth his soldiers, won the war with brute force, saved the Union, and then made his Gettysburg address declaring ‘malice towards none’.

India, unfortunately, had no Lincoln. Not only so, but its leaders were not prepared to fight to maintain the unity of the country, and described themselves as ‘tired men,

getting on in years too'[70]. Therefore the country was partitioned.

As the succeeding fifty years would show, the partition did not solve a single problem, neither for India, nor for Pakistan, neither for Hindus nor for Muslims. On the other hand it created insurmountable problems for both countries and communities. In fact Mountbatten knew beforehand that it was going to be a disaster. He wrote in his diary "Partition is sheer madness, and no one would ever induce me to agree to it were it not for this fantastic communal madness that has seized everybody and leaves no other course open. The responsibility for this mad decision must be placed squarely on Indian shoulders in the eyes of the world, for one day they will bitterly regret the decision they are about to make"[71].

Nor could the dreaded 'civil war' be avoided. What happened in Punjab in the wake of partition and later in Eastern Bengal in 1950, 1964 and 1971 was nothing less than a civil war. Worse still, an inconclusive variant of a civil war is still in progress in Kashmir.

Perhaps the only similarity between the two parallel cases of Gandhi and Lincoln was that both of them were assassinated shortly afterwards. Here again the similarity ends. The victorious Lincoln was killed by a Southerner, from the other side; the beaten Gandhi, by a Hindu, from his own.

One of the first persons with any say in the politics of the country, to understand that this indeed was Civil War, and should be fought as such was Syama Prasad Mookerjee. In his diary (in Bangla), on 10th January 1946 he writes, "If Hindus and Muslims unitedly try to maintain Indian culture and traditions, and live side by side according to their own beliefs then there should be no problem. But if Muslims show overmuch of devotion to their own religion and try to dominate the Hindus then should the Hindus not think how they can defend themselves? The Hindu-Muslim problem will not be solved without a Civil War. We do not want a Civil War – but if the other side prepare themselves for it, and we do not do so, we shall lose the war"[72]. Earlier, on 4th January he wrote (in English) "Force must, in the last analysis, be met with force. An internal policy of non-resistance to armed violence would eventually condemn any society to dissolution"[73].

These were prophetic words, for these were spoken when no Hindu believed that the country would be partitioned, when neither the Great Calcutta Killings nor the Noakhali Carnage had taken place[74]. Nobody listened to him. His own party, the Hindu Mahasabha, was too small to be of any lasting impact, and in any case the Hindu consciousness in the country was dominated by the Congress and its stalwarts led by Gandhi. The Hindus listened to what the Congress told them, and the result is today well known. Only now, fifty years after his death under questionable circumstances, people are beginning to appreciate the greatness of the man, and the truth of what he had said, and what could have happened if they had listened to him. As Lord Keynes had said, human beings will do the sensible thing, but only after all alternatives have been exhausted.

[1]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 217

[2]

ibid. p. 161-163

[3]

Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Rashtrasangram o Ponchaser Monnontor, (Bangla) Mitra & Ghosh, Calcutta, 1st Ed., 1998, p. 43. The title of the book in Bangla means “Struggle for Power and the Famine of 1450”. 1450 in Bengali era (solar) corresponds to April 1943-April 1944.

[4]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 135

[5]

Thy Hand, Great Anarch, ibid p. 646

[6]

‘Native’, meaning Indian, as opposed to ‘European’, meaning British, was a derogatory term in those days. The term ‘European’ was often conveniently extended to include Anglo-Indian, Indian Christian, or even anyone wearing western clothes.

[7]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 133, 143

[8]

ibid. Part II p. 156

[9]

ibid. Part II p. 150

[10] Poverty and Famines, by Amartya Sen, Oxford University Press, 1st Ed., third impression paperback 1999, p. 52-85

[11] A taktaposh is a spartan bedstead, a variant of what is known in other parts of India as a charpoy. It consists of a few cheap hardwood planks nailed together to form a horizontal surface suitable for lying upon, supported by four wooden posts of square cross section. It was a widespread practice in Bengal to stock the family's provisions and other possessions below the taktaposh.

[12]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 156

[13]

This episode is based on an interview with Rathindra Nath Sengupta of the Indian Administrative Services (IAS – successor to the ICS of the British times), former Chief Secretary, Government of West Bengal.

[14]

The Transfer of Power in India, V.P.Menon, Orient Longman, 1st Ed., 1993 Reprint, p. 355

[15]

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) Congress President 1940-46, Education Minister in Nehru's cabinet 1947-58, was the foremost among the so-called 'Nationalist Muslims' of India, Muslims who had aligned themselves with the Congress rather than the Muslim League,and who opposed Pakistan. Jinnah used to call him the 'show boy of the Congress'. His autobiography 'India Wins Freedom' was first published after his death in 1958, but some thirty pages of the text were withheld according to his will, and were added thirty years later in 1988. The book was dedicated to Jawaharlal Nehru, and quite a bit of those thirty pages are very critical of Nehru.

[16]

India wins Freedom, by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Orient Longman, Complete Version, Reprinted 1993, p. 164

[17]

ibid. p. 162

[18]

ibid. p. 170

[19]

Roses in December, ibid, p. 81

[20]

A bustee is a slum in Calcutta, usually a single storey construction of very cheap material and corrugated sheet or tiled roof. The equivalent terms in Mumbai and Delhi are, respectively, Zopadpatty and Jhuggi-Jhonpri colony. Dominque Lapierre's Ananda Nagar, City of Joy, was modelled on Pilkhana, one of the worst bustees of Howrah. Pilkhana (literally, a stable for elephants) is a slum of unimaginable poverty and squalor located in Howrah, across the river Hooghly from Calcutta.

[21]

Deshbibhag : Poshchat o Nepottho Kahini, ibid. p.87

[22]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 224, 226-227

[23]

Deshbibhag : Poshchat o Nepottho Kahini, ibid. p.86

[24]

Brothers against the Raj : A biography of Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose by Leonard A.Gordon, 1st Ed., Viking, New Delhi, 1990 (quoting a Sociology Ph.D. dissertation by Richard Lambert, University of Pennsylvania, 1951), p. 566

[25]

Jinnah of Pakistan, ibid. p. 284

[26]

ibid. p. 285

[27]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 229

[28]

Interview with Nirupom Som, Indian Police Service, ex-Deputy Commissioner, Port Police, ex-Commissioner, Calcutta Police, ex-Director-General of Police, West Bengal.

[29]

Jinnah of Pakistan, ibid. p. 284

[30]

ibid. p. 285

[31]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 229-232

[32] Deshbibhag : Poshchat o Nepottho Kahini, ibid. p.87

[33] Jinnah of Pakistan, ibid. p. 286

[34] Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 232-233

[35] Deshbibhag : Poshchat o Nepottho Kahini, ibid. p.87

[36]

India Wins Freedom, ibid.p. 170

[37]

Jinnah of Pakistan, ibid. p. 287

[38]

Krishna Sholoi, (Bangla, meaning ‘Black Sixteenth’), by Mizanur Rahaman, Sahana, Dacca, 1st Ed.,
2000

[39]

Amar Dekha Rajneetir Ponchas Bochhor, ibid., p. 196-197

[40]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid. Part II p. 232

[41]

Spoken to J.B.Kripalani, husband of Sucheta Kripalani (see later for her struggle in arranging relief for the Noakhali victims). Kripalani says he felt like hitting Burrows, but restrained himself. See India's March to Freedom, by D.P.Mishra, Har-Anand Publications, 2001, 1st Ed., p. 566

[42]

Noakhalir Mati o Manush, ibid., pp. 95-96

[43] ibid. p.120-122.

[44] Noakhalir Mati o Manush, , ibid. pp. 129-138

[45]

The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, ibid., p. 450

[46]

ibid. pp. 122-126

[47]

A very unfortunate custom prevailing in Hindu society until recently was that anyone who

converted out of Hinduism, even if he was forced to do so, could not ordinarily come back to the fold. Prayashchitta was one way of doing this. Return to Hinduism is today actively administered by several organisations, among them the Arya Samaj and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

[48]

Nellie Sengupta (1986-1973) British-born wife of 'Deshapriya' Jatindra Mohon Sengupta, Congress President, 1932. Nellie herself was the President of the Congress in 1933 when the party had been declared illegal. She stayed on at Chittagong in Pakistan even after partition, and worked for the Prabartak Sangha.

[49]

"Noakhalir Durjoger Diney" (Bangla, During the Dark Days in Noakhali) by Ashoka Gupta, Naya Udyog, Calcutta, 1st Ed. 1999.

[50]

ibid. p.33

[51]

ibid. p. 34

[52]

Ghomta (Ghunghat in Hindi) is the end of the sari made into a hood to cover the head of a woman for modesty. Once very common among Bengalis of both varieties, it has practically gone out of use among Hindu women, especially urban women, in West Bengal. Muslim women however still use it because of their religious compulsion to cover their hair.

[53]

McInnerny, Irishman, ICS Officer, District Magistrate, Noakhali 1945-46. He stayed on in Pakistan after independence. He was fluent not only in standard Bangla, but also in the dialects of Noakhali and Chittagong, which most Bengalis from outside these districts do not follow..

[54]

ibid. p.37

[55]

Sucheta Kripalani (1908-1974) Congresswoman, Gandhian, Bengali-born wife of Acharya J.B.Kripalani. Sucheta was an irrepressible character, and has been described as such very fondly by Ashoka Gupta. She was the Chief Minister of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, 1963-67.

[56]

ibid. pp. 62-63

[57]

ibid. p. 14

[58]

ibid. p. 20

[59]

ibid. p. 73

[60]

Noakhalir Mati o Manush, ibid. p.127-129

[61]

The Transfer of Power in India, ibid. p. 318

[62]

Noakhalir Durjoger Diney, ibid. p. 13

[63]

Tammany Hall is the headquarters of the Democratic Party in New York City, supposed to be the abode of wheeling-dealing politicians

[64]

The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, ibid.

[65]

ibid., p. 450-454

[66]

Jihad, Holy war upon infidels, the duty of every Muslim. 'A religious war with those who are unbelievers in the mission of Mohammed' (Dictionary of Islam by Thomas Patrick Hughes, 1999 Edition, p. 243). It has been argued that Jihad does not condone atrocities upon innocent unarmed non-Muslims, that it necessarily includes an inner struggle that every Muslim must wage within himself to cleanse himself of all that is impure, and so on (based probably on the distinction made by Sufi writers between al-Jihad'ul Akbar, the greater warfare against one's own lusts, and al-Jihad'ul Asghar, the lesser warfare, against infidels, ibid.). The duty of religious war (which all commentators agree, is a duty extending to all times) is, however, quite explicitly laid down in the following verses of the Qur'an, and no such fine distinctions are made there: Surahs ix, 5,6; ix, 29; iv, 76-79; ii, 214, 215; viii,39,42. The Traditions are equally explicit on this score -- see Sahihu Muslim, Sahihu Bukhari. The academic Sufi interpretations are, it is submitted, rather unimportant to hapless non-Muslims who have been the victims of Muslim mobs baying for their blood in the name of Jihad.

[67]

Noakhalir Durjoger Diney ibid. p. 76

[68]

The History and Culture of the Indian People, R.C. Majumdar, General Ed., Vol. XI, Struggle for Freedom, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2nd Ed., 1988, p. 606, quoting Coupland, R., The Constitutional Problem in India, Oxford University Press, 1945.

[69]

White House Years, Henry Kissinger, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1st Ed., 1979, p. 879

[70]

Nehru’s conversation with Leonard Mosley, quoted in The History and Culture of the

Indian People, Vol. XI, Struggle for Freedom ibid., p. 768. A yearning to grab power at any cost is discernible.

[71]

Freedom at Midnight, ibid., p. 151

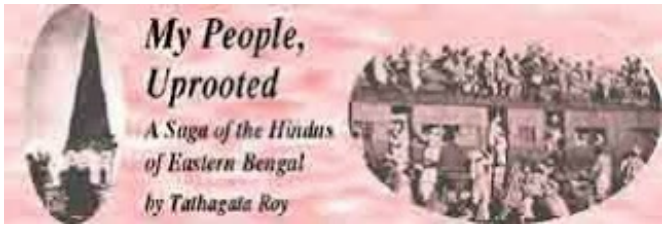
[72] Syamaprasader Diary o Mrityu Prasanga (in Bangla) (The Diary of Syama Prasad and about his Death) Uma Prasad Mookerjee, Ed., Mitra & Ghosh, Calcutta, 1st Ed., 1988, p. 74.

[73]

ibid., p. 58

[74]

Much later, in early 1947 George Abell told Lord Mountbatten that the country was heading for a civil war. See Freedom at Midnight ibid., p. 95



Chapter 4

PARTITION AT LAST

From the close of the war events all over India began moving with

Meanwhile on September 2, 1946 the so-called Interim Government, consisting of ministers from both the Congress and the Muslim League, took office, in which Liaquat Ali Khan chose and got the Finance portfolio. He promptly turned out to be a complete stonewall to all proposals of the Congress, and the Interim Government was a government only in name. It was Lord Wavell, and later Mountbatten, the Viceroy, who both reigned and ruled.

The history of this period is well documented by authoritative persons such as Alan Campbell-Johnson, V.P.Menon, Penderel Moon, Leonard Mosley and others, and it is not necessary to recount the same except to the extent germane to the theme of this book. On June 3, 1947 the Prime Minister of Great Britain, the Rt. Hon. Clement Attlee, rose in the House of Commons to announce the acceptance by the Government of the scheme to partition the country, and to table a statement by His Majesty's Government to that effect. On June 20 the Bengal Legislative Assembly passed a motion for the partition of the province into East and West Bengal.

The decision to partition the province Bengal was a personal victory for Syama Prasad Mookerjee who had been indefatigably campaigning for such partition. The treatment that the Hindus got in the hands of the Muslims in East Pakistan after partition amply demonstrated his foresight in doing so. Jinnah was aghast at the proposal for partition and said that it was 'a sinister move actuated by spite and bitterness'[1]. At one point Mountbatten asked Jinnah about his views on Suhrawardy's idea of 'sovereign, independent Bengal' and Jinnah said in reply without hesitation, "I should be delighted. What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta? They had much better remain united and independent. I am sure they would be on friendly terms with us."[2] Stanley Wolpert, author of 'Jinnah of Pakistan' observes that Liaquat Ali also agreed with Jinnah on this question and remarked to Sir Eric Mieville[3], "that he was in no way worried about Bengal because he was convinced in his own mind that the province would never divide"[4]. Obviously the expectation was that Muslim-majority independent Bengal, with its great city of Calcutta, would eventually get rid of its Hindu minority and become a part, or at least a satellite, of Pakistan. It is this dream of theirs that was shattered by Syama Prasad. Some years later when Nehru has remarked to Syama Prasad that he and his party had consented to the partition of the country, he had retorted "You partitioned

India ; I partitioned Pakistan"[5]

.

This 'sovereign, independent Bengal' was the brainchild of a few Hindu leaders of the Bengal Congress who had sided with those leaders of the League who were staunchly opposed to partition of the province. Among these Hindu leaders the foremost was Sarat Chandra Bose ; among the Muslim League leaders none other than Suhrawardy, together with Abul Hashim, said to be a 'progressive' among the Leaguers in Bengal. Sarat Bose by this time had left the Congress (something that he did not do even when his brother Subhas left the party to form his Forward Bloc) and launched a party called the 'Socialist Republican Party'. These gentlemen, in all their wisdom, thought of a sovereign, independent Bengal, which of course would have a Muslim majority.

The plan for sovereign independent Bengal was hatched in April 1947. According to Abul Hashim it would be a state where Hindus and Muslims would have equal rights and equal opportunity to conduct themselves in accordance with their own beliefs. A committee for preparation of a draft declaration for the formation of such a state was constituted at the residence of Suhrawardy in a meeting attended by Nazimuddin, Fazlur Rahman, Kiran Sankar Ray, Nalini Ranjan Sarker, Satya Baksi and others. The drafting was really done by Sarat Chandra Bose, who conceived it as a 'Socialist Republic'. Mountbatten and Burrows both considered the scheme with interest, and it was at their instance that the term 'Socialist' was omitted from the draft. The draft was finalised and signed by Sarat Bose and Abul Hashim on May 20. According to this draft, the state would first be ruled by an interim government in which the Prime Minister would be Muslim and the Home Minister Hindu. Later there would be a Constituent Assembly with 16 Muslim and 14 Hindu members.

What aberration overtook these supposedly sagacious, politically experienced men like Sarat Bose and Kiran Sankar Ray to join forces with a man like Suhrawardy who, just eight months ago had unleashed such untold horror on the Hindus of Calcutta and Noakhali? With Kiran Sankar Ray it was quite possibly his yearning to retain his extensive Zamindari at Teota in the district of Dacca – he knew for sure that the Muslims would make short shrift of him and his Zamindari (as they actually did) once Muslim majority East Bengal came into being, while he might have a fighting chance in sovereign Bengal. As for Sarat Bose, it was even more inexplicable. He was a West Bengali, very firmly entrenched in Calcutta. Was it a desperate measure to regain political ground in the province that he had lost through erroneous political decisions and lack of foresight? With Suhrawardy it was clearly the fact that he too was a West Bengali, and would not stand much chance of getting as much prominence in East Bengal (the Premiership of East Bengal went to Nazimuddin) as he might possibly get in United Bengal. It was also said that he dearly loved the city of Calcutta. For all the wrong reasons, of course.

Be that as it may, and Providence be thanked, there was to be no Muslim-majority Sovereign Independent United Bengal. Hindu opinion was very firmly against it. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, a nationalist English daily of Calcutta, ran an opinion poll towards

the end of April 1947, which revealed that as many as 98% of the Hindus wanted partition of the province. Had there been a Muslim-majority Sovereign United Bengal as planned by Bose and Hashim, the plight of all Bengali Hindus today would have been like the Sindhi Hindus, with no part of the country to call their own.

Bengal was eventually partitioned at the hands of an English Barrister of distinction, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the reason for whose choice was his lack of any connection with India[6]

. Sir Cyril was assisted by four other members of the Boundary Commission Bijon Mukherjee, C.C.Biswas, M.A.Rahman and M.M.Akram, all of them lawyers. As the names tell, the first two were Hindus, the last two Muslims, and there was practically nothing that they agreed upon, with the result that the award, eventually published on August 17, 1947, two days after independence, was entirely the handiwork of Sir Cyril alone. One point is to be noted in respect of the terms of reference of the Commission : the Commission was required to partition the province on the basis of Muslim-majority and Non-Muslim-majority areas, not on the basis of Muslim-majority and Hindu-majority areas.

As was to be expected, neither the Congress (meaning the Hindus) nor the League (meaning the Muslims) were happy with the award. West Bengal got thirty-six per cent of the land area and thirty-five per cent of the population. Only sixteen per cent of the total Muslim population was left in West Bengal, but a whopping forty-two per cent of the Hindu population in East Bengal, numbering some thirteen million. Non-Muslim-majority Chittagong Hill Tracts was given to Pakistan on the grounds that its approach was only through Muslim-majority Chittagong. The League desperately wanted Calcutta in Pakistan, and their supporters had started believing that the province would be partitioned along the Hooghly River. Bhabatosh Dutt mentions Muslim professors of Islamia College, Calcutta (now Maulana Azad College) who wrote in their option forms “Pakistan, preferably Calcutta’. One of them had tried to console Dutt by saying ‘at least you are going to have Howrah’[7]

. However, even before the Radcliffe award was out it became clear that Calcutta was going to remain in India.

The population of East Bengal, according to the 1941 census, was 28 % Hindu, 70 % Muslim and 2 % others, mainly Buddhists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and a handful of Christians in the coastal districts and among the Garo tribesmen in the foothills of Mymensingh. As opposed to this, according to the 1991 census the population of present-day Bangladesh is 10 % Hindu, 88 % Muslim. And it is in these figures that the terrible injustice done to the Bengali Hindus, quite a bit of it by themselves, lies.

The geography of partition (see Chapter 1, figure 1) was very interesting. The whole of Dacca and Chittagong divisions went to Pakistan, and the whole of Burdwan division to West Bengal. The bulk of Presidency division, including the city of Calcutta remained in India, but most of the district of Jessore, and a part of the district of Nadia went to Pakistan. Most of Rajshahi division, went to Pakistan but the northern districts of

Darjeeling and most of the districts of Jalpaiguri and Malda and a part of Dinajpur remained in India. These divisions were done on the basis of religious majority in each thana (area governed by each police station) and on the 'principle of contiguity'. The princely state of Cooch Behar, minus some of the 'enclaves' (explained later in this chapter) remained in India and became part of West Bengal. The Bangla-speaking Sylhet district of Assam was subjected to an unnatural referendum (again explained later in this chapter) according to which most of the district opted for Pakistan, except for three thanas, namely Ratabari, Patharkandi, Badarpur and a part of Karimganj thana which opted for India and became part of the Indian state of Assam. The result was what has been shown in Figure 2.

West Pakistan took away a neat chunk of territory along the western fringe of undivided India, and created no further problems other than coming in the way of the tiny Indo-Afghan or Indo-Iranian trade. East Pakistan was quite another matter. Without meaning any disrespect, it created a cartographical monstrosity, a deep ulcer on the right flank of India. It practically cut off the then-existing state of Assam (now generally referred to as the Seven Sisters of the North-East, namely the states of rump Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura) – this region remained connected to the rest of India by the thin umbilical cord of the 30-kilometre-wide Siliguri corridor. It broke West Bengal into two parts, a small northern part consisting of the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, and the large southern part consisting of the rest of the districts (these two parts were later on joined up during the states re-organisation of 1957). It made a total joke of the transportation system of East and North Bengal and Assam. It created anomalies like the exchange of Murshidabad and Khulna districts, the award of the Non-Muslim-majority Chittagong Hill Tracts to Muslim-majority Pakistan, and hitherto unheard-of problems like that of the North Bengal enclaves. Each one of these aspects requires explanation.

First, the referendum in Sylhet. Sylhet, the proper Bangla name of which was Srihotto, lies along the foot of the Khasi and Jaintia hills of the present-day Indian state of Meghalaya, the North Cachar and Mikir Hills of Assam, and the hills of the Indian state of Tripura. The rain-laden south-east monsoon winds get their first hit on these hills after cruising up from the Bay of Bengal over the low plains of present-day Bangladesh, and consequently it rains very heavily in these parts all the year round. All that water then runs down Sylhet district and out through the Meghna River, while in the process creating huge water bodies known as Haors – so huge that the boatmen crossing them have to navigate by the position of stars. This feature had given Sylhet a seafaring tradition despite being far away from the sea, and it translated itself into an adventurousness not known among many Bengalis from other Bangla-speaking parts of the country.

The district, even at the time of partition, was a rich one in mineral and agricultural produce, with tea estates along the Tripura foothills and a cement plant at Chhatak, run with limestone and coal from the Khasi Hills. Later on abundant reserves of Natural Gas

were discovered. The density of population was however, much more than that in the Brahmaputra valley.

Consequently, several things happened. First, unlike in other parts, Muslims in this district took to liberal education. Secondly, they emigrated in large numbers to different parts of the globe (today parts around Canary Wharf, especially Brick Lane, in the Docklands of London are inhabited entirely by Sylheti Muslims), in the process developing a catholicity of outlook which gave the district a much better tradition of Hindu-Muslim amity than other parts. Thirdly the Sylhetis, particularly the Hindus among them, managed to get a disproportionately large share in the state machinery of Assam.

The reason for this is very interesting. The province of Assam in the British days consisted of three parts – the Assamese-speaking Brahmaputra valley, the Bangla-speaking Surma valley (synonymous with Sylhet) and the hill districts. The people in the hills kept pretty much to themselves and seldom ventured out of the hills. The Brahmaputra valley was relatively thinly populated as compared to Sylhet, and extremely rich in natural resources, such as a very fertile soil, abundant forest wealth, tea plantations and the only proven deposit of oil discovered upto the tiime of independence. The people therefore became quite affluent, and naturally rather less inclined towards Government Service. In fact the state of the valley attracted settlers from elsewhere, mainly land-hungry Muslim agriculturists from East Bengal. This was further encouraged by a conscious policy of Muslimisation of the valley followed during the rule of Premier Mohammed Saadullah. The bloody ethnic strife that plagued the valley in the nineteen-eighties was the result of this Muslimisation half-a century ago. That, however, is a different story. Readers interested in this aspect of history of the subcontinent are referred to Sanjoy Hazarika's book, 'Rites of Passage'[8]

.

It is this affluence of the Assamese from the Brahmaputra valley and the consequent disinclination towards Government Service that was responsible for the dominance of Sylhetis from the Surma valley in the Assam government during British rule. In India service in the government has always been equated with power, and there was no exception here. With their domination of the government the Sylhetis became powerful, and flaunted their superiority over the Assamese from the Brahmaputra valley. This was, naturally, not liked by the Assamease, nor by the Assam Congress which was dominated by Assamese-speaking leaders led by Gopinath Bardoloi, then the Premier and the first Chief Minister of the state after independence.

There never was any talk of partitioning Assam, a Hindu-majority province with a large tribal population, some of whom were Christian, some Hindu, and the rest following their traditional religions. However, as a result of Sylhet district being Bangla-speaking, marginally Muslim majority, and contiguous to the Muslim majority districts of Mymensingh and Tipperah of East Bengal, it was declared in the Statement made by His Majesty’s Government on June 3, 1947 that a referendum would be held in the district to determine whether the people wished to go to Pakistan or to India. A similar referendum

was also held in the North-West Frontier Province. It should be noted that the critical factor in opting for these referendums was contiguity to the land mass which would later become Pakistan. There were other Muslim-dominated districts or parts of districts in the country, such as Bahraich or Moradabad in the United Provinces or Calicut in Madras Presidency, but nobody ever dreamt of such districts going to Pakistan.

Now, there was a strange catch in the whole process. The Assam Congress, led by Gopinath Bardoloi and his group, wanted the district to go to Pakistan so that the hegemony of their group would be assured in the rump province of Assam after independence. Maulana Azad obliquely acknowledges this when he says, in the context of the 'grouping plan' of the Cabinet Mission, that the objection to the plan within the Congress came from certain leaders from Assam who 'were possessed by an inexplicable fear of Bengalis'[9]

.

To be fair to Bardoloi, this is not quite correct. In all probability Bardoloi was more afraid of Muslim domination of the province (which Maulana Azad would, understandably, be chary of mentioning) rather than Bengali domination, and not without reason. He had seen with his own eyes what Saadullah had done to his province, and correctly apprehended that verysoon the sparsely populated Brahmaputra valley would be overrun by land-hungry Muslims from East Bengal who would be encouraged by their Sylheti co-religionists. This was not an impossibility, and the result would have been loss of Assam for India. Debdas Ghosal[10]

, who spent his childhood at their Zamindari at Ramharir Char, near Goalpara town, Assam, still shudders when he remembers the gestures made by their Muslim peasants agitating for inclusion of the district in Pakistan. Although there never was any question of Goalpara going to Pakistan, it was a border district with a large Muslim minority, and the Muslim League decided to show their might even here to intimidate the Hindus. To do that they got the peasants to go around all over the Ghosal estate, with freshly-severed cows' heads on stakes dripping blood, shouting 'Allahu Akbar, Ladke Lenge Pakistan'. Bardoloi's fears, therefore were quite justified. His great mistake was that he decided to throw away the baby with the bath-water, without sparing a thought for the Hindus of Sylhet.

The League of course wanted the district in Pakistan. This issue thus became one of the rarest things in those days in which the League and the official leadership of the Congress cooperated, albeit covertly. This is doubly remarkable because of the fact that in spite of the district being Muslim-majority, the League was not confident of a victory here[11]

. The position was however substantially altered when the Assam Congress came forward to help the League, albeit largely through inaction.

This they did in several ways. First, the provincial leadership refused to extend any substantial help in the form of money, men, propaganda material or even moral support

to the district leadership. Secondly, they connived with the League in disenfranchising the tea estate labourers on the grounds that they were not Sylhetis, or 'sons of the soil'. These tea estate labourers were mostly 'indentured labour' from among the hardy people of the tribal areas of Bihar (now Jharkhand), and had been living on the gardens for at least two generations. There was therefore no reason why they should not vote, but in effect they were not allowed to do so. For the record it appears that the Congress did claim that the voters in the Labour and the Trade and Commerce constituencies – meaning mainly the tea labour – should be allowed to vote, but no effort was put in to carry through this very reasonable demand, and the demand failed. The district leadership of the Congress of course raised holy hell, but they had no access to the all-India leaders. The result, finally, was that the voting was done in the General, Mohammedan and Indian Christian categories[12]. A third method was physically preventing the Hindus from voting, with the state machinery looking the other way. Subodh Lal Shome[13]

recalls that roadblocks had been erected by the Muslim League volunteers at a number of places in the rural areas around Chhatak to prevent Hindus from travelling to the nearest town to vote, and the Congress government of Bardoloi did nothing to ensure a free and fair election. A Hindu police officer by the name of Purkayastha took it upon himself to intervene and remove these without orders and even resorted to firing. However very few officers were capable of such daring.

The indefatigable Syama Prasad Mookerjee entered the fray, toured the district, and persuaded Hindu Sylhetis all over Bengal to travel to Sylhet and vote at the referendum. Some of them came from as far away as Delhi and Burma. It is believed that because of their different culture, a section of the Muslim population also voted for India ; and had there been a little effort on the part of the Assam Congress, the district would not have been lost to India.. Ultimately however, the disenfranchisement tipped the scales. Sylhet went to Pakistan, with a relatively thin majority, 239,619 to 184,041[14]

. Only three thanas, namely Ratabari, Patharkandi, Badarpur and a part of Karimganj thana remained in India.

Next, the transportation system. Road transport in those days was in a state of infancy, but railways and inland water transport were both highly developed in East Bengal and Assam. Most of East Bengal and Assam were covered by the metre gauge network of Bengal Assam Railway, and there was a well-organised system of ferries where the rivers had not been bridged. For example to go to Guwahati (then Gauhati) from Calcutta one had to board a broad gauge train from Sealdah terminal, and change to a metre gauge train either at Parbatipur or at Santahar junctions. This metre gauge train would take one to Amingaon where one would have to cross the mighty Brahmaputra in a ferry to reach Guwahati on the south bank of the river. From Guwahati again another line stretched away to Upper Assam via Lumding junction to serve the extensive tea estates and India's lone oilfield there. A branch would take off from Lumding and pass through 'Hill section' of the Mikir and North Cachar Hills through Badarpur, Kulaura, Akhaura and Laksam junctions on to Chittagong port. This branch, considered an engineering feat in

those days, was constructed to export a part of the Assam tea through Chittagong port. The bulk of the tea and the jute grown in Assam and East Bengal was transported by inland water transport down the Brahmaputra, Jamuna and Meghna, through the distributaries in the Sundarban deltas, on to Calcutta port to be shipped abroad, or to the jute mills dotting the sides of the River Hooghly, to be processed there. It was a beautifully well-coordinated, well-orchestrated, mutually complementary system of rail and inland waterway, by which huge quantities of merchandise were transported in the most economical and environment-friendly manner, while providing employment to a large number of Indian personnel, both Hindu and Muslim.

Partition of the province undid the system in one stroke. The jute fields were left in Pakistan, the jute mills in India. A major stretch of the railway network between Calcutta and Guwahati and between Calcutta and Siliguri was intercepted in Pakistani territory, so that in order to travel or ship goods from India to India it became necessary to travel though the unfriendly country of East Pakistan. The line taking off from Lumding junction entered Pakistan at Karimganj shortly after descending from the hills, and the huge expenditure incurred in its construction became largely pointless. Chittagong port was of course in Pakistan, and so was the inland waterway route over the Jamuna and Meghna rivers and a major part of the Sundarban river system. The extent to which India continues to suffer to this day because of Bangladesh not permitting transit through their territory between Indian terminals would be clear from the following table. The pre-partition distances given are approximate.

TABLE I

Between Indian towns	Distance over Surface Transport before partition, in kilometres	Distance over Surface Transport after partition exclusively through Indian territory, in kilometers
Calcutta-Cooch Behar	480	696
Calcutta-Guwahati	780	994
Calcutta-Silchar	620	1378
Calcutta-Agartala	430	1629

It should however be mentioned that Bangladesh does permit inland water transport to ply between Calcutta and Guwahati and between Calcutta and Karimganj over Bangladeshi rivers. There is also considerable road traffic (involving transhipment at borders - Indian and Bangladeshi trucks are not allowed into each other's territory) as well as a small volume of rail traffic between India and Bangladesh, but no traffic from India to India through Bangladesh.

India very hurriedly put together a rail network known as the Assam Rail Link by joining up and upgrading minor metre-gauge branch lines in the Dooars area of northern West Bengal. This line was yet another engineering feat, but continued to be very unsatisfactory till the Brahmaputra was bridged across at Pandu in 1967, and the Ganga over the Farakka Barrage in 1971, and the line was converted to broad gauge eventually. In the pre-partition days rail travel from Sealdah to Guwahati took about twenty-four hours, with one ferry crossing. After partition, and over the Assam rail link this went up to about forty-two hours, including two ferry crossings. Only after the completion of the two bridges and conversion of the entire line upto Guwahati to broad gauge has it come down to its pre-partition duration. Surface travel to Silchar, and especially Agartala, from

Calcutta are still extremely arduous, and even poor people are forced to travel by air paying fares which, despite subsidies, can go up per head to a man's earnings of a fortnight.

As a result of the award of Radcliffe as many as five districts had to be partitioned. These were Nadia, Jessore, Malda, Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri. Moreover, Muslim-majority Murshidabad district was given to India in consideration of the fact that the headwaters of the Bhagirathi river (which later becomes the Hooghly as it flows by Calcutta) were in this district, and without control on these waters India would not be able to ensure the navigability of Calcutta port.

In exchange Hindu-majority Khulna district went to Pakistan. Buddhist-majority Chittagong Hill Tracts also went to Pakistan, on the grounds that access to this district was possible only through Muslim-majority Chittagong.

Mountbatten did not want the Radcliffe award to be published before India became independent, and therefore some of these districts had two independence days – one on 15th August, with the rest of the nation, and the other on 17th when the fate of the district was finally decided. Thus the Indian tricolour was hoisted at Khulna, and Rangamati (Chittagong Hill Tracts) and the Pakistani crescent-and-star at Berhampore and Krishnagore (headquarters of Murshidabad and Nadia) on 15th August, to be reversed two days later.

The enclaves of North Bengal are another strange story. As far as known to the author no such thing exists anywhere else in the world. These are basically islands of Indian territory in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) or Bangladeshi territory in India. The Indian enclaves among these were, at the time of Radcliffe, under the administration of local Sardars (Chieftains) who had been granted Jahgirs (fiefdoms) by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Later on, when the British annexed North Bengal but let Cooch Behar remain as a 'Native State', these became islands of Cooch Behar state in British India in the district of Rangpur. When Cooch Behar acceded to India the enclaves became Indian islands in Pakistan. Similarly there were islands of British India in Cooch Behar state, and wherever these were Muslim-majority they went to Pakistan, and became Pakistani enclaves or islands in independent India. There are now 111 such Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India. Because, generally speaking, Muslims had no difficulty in living in India but the same was not true of Hindus living in Pakistan or Bangladesh, as we shall see later in this book, the enclaves eventually became populated entirely by Muslims. The sensible thing under the circumstances was to have the enclaves exchanged between the two countries. There was a clause to this effect in the Indira-Mujib treaty of 1972, but to this day this has not been given effect to. This results in serious law and order problems from time to time, and gives rise to demands for providing corridors to these enclaves through foreign territory. Such a problem arose with South Berubari enclave and with providing the Teen Bigha corridor. These enclaves are now the refuge of smugglers, cattle thieves and assorted other cross-border criminals, and will continue to remain so till they are exchanged.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are densely forested hills bordering the eastern fringe of the district of Chittagong. The hills are contiguous to the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) of India and the Arakan hills of Burma (now Myanmar). The population was sparse and consisted largely of Buddhist Chakma tribesmen who are a Mongoloid people, and speak a dialect of the Tibeto-Burman family. It was expected that the tracts would go to India, and the Indian tricolour was hoisted at the headquarters of the tracts at Rangamati on 15th August 1947. Two days later however, the Radcliffe award was announced, and the tricolour was replaced by the crescent-and-star Pakistani flag. The only approach to the Tracts was through the coastal plains of Chittagong district, and it is on these grounds that the Tracts went to Pakistan.

Subsequently the Tracts had an interesting history. There were consistent efforts at converting the tribesmen to Islam and settling Muslims from the overpopulated plains of East Pakistan in the Tracts. This embittered relations between Bengali Muslims and the Buddhist Chakmas, to such an extent that during the Bangladesh liberation war Raja Tridib Roy, 'king' of the Chakmas, sided with the Pakistanis. He went over to Pakistan after their defeat, and served for some time as the Pakistani ambassador to Argentina. Meanwhile relations between the Chakmas and the Bangladeshi Muslims did not improve, and the policy of Islamisation and settling of Muslims in the Tracts continued. Bangladesh, unlike India, does not have a policy of preservation of the culture of ethnic minorities, and the Chakmas, threatened with being swamped by Bengali Muslim culture rebelled and carried on insurgency for some time.

Now on to Calcutta on the morning of 15th August 1947.

Things had not been very quiet in the weeks preceding independence in Calcutta, though it must be said that compared to Punjab it was an abode of peace. A spate of rioting had started in Calcutta from July 31, in protest of which Gandhi stated a 'fast unto death'. This, unlike the East Bengal killings, was real rioting, with both sides hurting each other. This rioting abated shortly thereafter, but continued in a sporadic manner till well after independence. As late as on 1st September, Sachindra Mitra, a Congress leader, was stabbed to death by Muslim goons in front of Nakhoda Mosque (the biggest mosque in Calcutta) while leading a procession whose slogan was Hindu-Muslim ek ho (Hindus and Muslims unite). Similarly three other Congressmen, namely Smritish Banerjee, Sushil Dasgupta, and Bireswar Ghosh were mercilessly killed by Muslims around this time while preaching Hindu-Muslim amity[15]

. Anti-Hindu violence in Eastern Bengal had also started around the same time. The story of Ila Banerjee, a lonely widow of 86 now living in Vrindavan, formerly of village Barandipara, Jessore, has been described later in this chapter.

At Calcutta however, Independence Day dawned without any incidents and amid large-scale jubilation. Hindu and Muslim embraced each other on the streets, sprinkled rose water on each other. Shops were decked in flowers and festoons. A mob stormed Government House, the residence of the Governor of Bengal modeled on Keddleston Hall, the country seat of Lord Curzon. They were not exactly violent, but to them

patriotism took the form of vandalism. They poked at paintings of British administrators with the pointy ends of their umbrellas and disfigured them. By then Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari had taken oath as the Governor, and Dr. P.C.Ghosh as the Chief Minister. Suhrawardy was still in his beloved Calcutta.

The person whom the independence movement made the most famous, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, should have been at New Delhi on this day, smiling benignly as the Union Jack gave way to the Indian tricolour. Yet he is not. He has been sent to Calcutta by the Governor-General, Lord Mountbatten as his 'one-man boundary force'. In this, the Governor-General's request has been endorsed by none other than the infamous Suhrawardy and his sidekick Usman who want Gandhi to 'save Calcutta's Muslims'. Suhrawardy's claim on Gandhi is typical of the man : "After all the Muslims have as much a claim on you as the Hindus. You have always said you are as much of us as of the Hindus." [16]

Gandhi on this day is found camping at Hydari Manzil, an abandoned mansion in Beliaghata, then a suburb of Calcutta, with Suhrawardy in tow. Suhrawardy meanwhile has been heckled a number of times, probably jostled and perhaps spat upon, but not seriously manhandled. Gandhi is fasting and holding prayer meetings, praying for the return of Hindu-Muslim amity. Mountbatten has called him the one-man boundary force. Later, in the evening he would tour the Muslim parts of the city in a car chauffeured by Suhrawardy.

The previous day Suhrawardy has expressed 'genuine regret' for his role in 'Direct Action' and the Great Calcutta Killings[17]

, almost exactly a year after he and Nazimuddin made their rabid speeches at the Maidan that started the bloodbath. Some ten thousand people have come to see Gandhi that day at Beliaghata. Were there some in that crowd wondering whether the Indian Penal Code should now be rewritten to make an expression of 'genuine regret' sufficient penalty for plotting the mass murder of tens of thousands of innocent people on grounds of their religion? And that too while remaining at the head of a Government! People had been sent to the gallows for lesser crimes at Nuremberg only a year ago!

Gandhi's magic did work wonders however, and there were no further untoward incidents in Calcutta. Yet, some questions survive. Why did he not camp at Amritsar or Ferozepore, not to speak of Lahore or Montgomery, where the situation was a million times worse than that at Calcutta? In fact in Calcutta, even before the arrival of Gandhi things had quieted down to a great extent, and only sporadic cases of stabbing or arson were heard of. On the other hand in Punjab the Pakistanis were sending down trainloads of Hindu and Sikh corpses, and the Hindus and Sikhs were retaliating with similar gestures. Did Gandhi think that he stood a much better chance of influencing the mild and sentimental Bengalis rather than the martial and hardheaded Punjabis? At any rate the ultimate reason could have been only that he knew he stood no chance of

succeeding in Punjab. Therefore, like the astute politician that he was, he chose not to attempt what he could not possibly achieve. Politics, after all, is merely the art of the possible!

While in West Pakistan rivers of blood were flowing on both sides of the border, East Pakistan was still largely quiet and tranquil immediately following partition. Leela Mazumdar[18]

traveled to Assam by train through East Pakistan (or East Bengal) in September 1947, entering that country at Darshana, crossing the mighty Padma over the Hardinge Bridge, changing to the metre gauge railway system at Santahar, on to Bogra, Lalmonirhat and back again into Indian territory at Gitaldaha in Assam. She observed people entraining with beaming faces at Sealdah station, leaving for their Baari (home village) in East Bengal. They had not yet realised that their Baari was in a foreign country, that in a few years they would require a passport and a visa to visit the village where their families had been living for the last, maybe, twenty generations. They also knew not what the future had in store for them, by way of persecution, ethnic cleansing and eventually losing all memory of a home village, or Baari.

Ashok Mitra sent his six-year-old only daughter with the school party to Loreto Convent, Darjeeling (a very upmarket residential school run by Irish Catholic nuns) and saw her off at Sealdah station. This was in early 1949, and she traveled by largely the same route, leaving India at Darshana, and re-entering at Haldibari. Mitra mentions the ambience then to be absolutely quiet and peaceful, and also that a number of Pakistani girls boarded the train at different places in East Pakistan to go to the same school[19]

. It was obviously not all that peaceful in other parts of East Pakistan, as has been described by various people, especially Hiranmay Banerjee.

V.P.Menon's remarks on the exodus of refugees from Pakistan are very revealing, and deserve to be quoted in full. Menon writes[20]

: "It has been estimated that up to the middle of 1948 about 5,500,000 non-Muslims were brought across the border from West Punjab and other provinces of Western Pakistan. About the same number of Muslims moved into Pakistan from East Punjab (including the East Punjab states), Delhi, the United Provinces, Ajmer-Merwara, Alwar, Bharatpur, Gwalior and Indore. During the same period about 1,250,000 non-Muslims crossed the border from Eastern Pakistan into West Bengal. These figures do not of course take into account about 400,000 non-Muslims who later migrated to India from Sind. There is today hardly a Hindu or Sikh to be found in Western Pakistan. . . . . The communal exodus from East Bengal in the early stages after partition was but a trickle. It assumed critical proportions much later, and then the Hindus from East Bengal also had to undergo severe hardships and privation. In fact it was when the West Pakistan officials had established themselves in East Bengal that the exodus of Hindus began in earnest. It has always been my belief that the East Bengal Muslims, if left to themselves, would have been content to live with their Hindu brethren as one family, and that it was the policy of

the West Pakistan officials that was responsible for the mass exodus of Hindus from East Bengal. The flood of refugees had already strained the resources of the West Bengal Government, while more and more continue to come across the border (this was in 1957 - author). If this influx is not stopped and mutual goodwill and understanding are not established, this issue is bound to overshadow any other that faces the Indian and Pakistan Governments."

Menon had always been a scrupulously honest person, and this is manifest from the passage quoted above : he has carefully separated what he knows for a fact from what he believes to be true. His belief, namely that the West Pakistanis alone, or even primarily, are responsible for the persecution of Hindus in East Bengal, is widely shared today in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, and is expressed whenever this uncomfortable subject comes up, which is not very often. The question is, is the belief correct? And the answer is no, though it contains a lot of truth. Granted that the presence of the West Pakistani officials, and more than that, of the Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims, had a lot to do with the persecution and killing of Hindus in East Bengal, by no means can it be contended that the East Bengali Muslims themselves were free of blame, as we shall see in the course of this book. In fact what we have seen so far does not at all corroborate this belief. Neither the leaders of persecution, such as Suhrawardy, Nazimuddin or Sarwar, nor their followers, such as the marauding mobs of Noakhali in 1946, or Barisal in 1950, were anything except Bengali Muslims. At the most it can be said that there is a larger percentage of Hindu-haters among Urdu-speaking Muslims than among Bangla speaking ones.

Not only so, but there is a time-dependent and personal element as well, as has been sought to be expounded below. In order to study this aspect in some depth, it is now proposed to enter into a short discussion on the complex relationships that exist between Bengali Muslims and other communities, notably Bengali Hindus.

The root of V.P.Menon's belief, also shared by others, probably lies, at least partly, in the following syllogism :

(i) The majority Bengali Muslims of East Bengal love their language very much, so much so that they fought against their religious compatriots from West Pakistan, all the way from the uprising of 21st February 1952 till the Bangladesh liberation war (true).
(ii) The minority Bengali Hindus of East Bengal are equally fond of their language, and supported that fight wholeheartedly (true).
(iii) It must, therefore, follow that the former must necessarily be fond of the latter, though occasionally they may get swayed otherwise.

The question now is, whether the third proposition is true or false?

The truth is that for the Bengali Muslim multitude it is sometimes partly true and sometimes false, depending on how the average Bengali Muslim is feeling at a given point of time. It is never completely true, but sometimes it is almost completely false. The relationship between the two communities, described earlier in Chapter 1, has

always been rather complex, quite different from the simple, fierce hatred the average Indian Punjabi and Pakistani Punjabi have for each other even today. The Bengali Muslim has always been torn between his two identities, the Bengali one and the pan-Islamic one (see Chapter1, also Rafiuddin Ahmed's 'The Bengal Muslim'[21]

). The more the erudition of an individual, the more has been this state of his being torn, until it reaches the stage of unbearable anguish in people like Syed Mujtabaa Ali, Dr. Muhammad Shaheedullah, S. Wajed Ali or Rezaul Karim. The Bengali Hindu has never had this problem, his loyalty was always cent per cent with Bengal ; and therefore his attitude towards the Muslim has not varied. On the other hand, in the Bengali Muslim, in times like during the Noakhali carnage the pan-Islamism completely dominated, while the Bangladesh Liberation War was fought entirely on his Bengali identity.

This state of being torn between two identities, it has to be said, is an essential feature of all peoples who have been converted to Islam, that is to say all non-Arab Muslims. This has been stated with remarkable clarity by the famous author Sir Vidia S. Naipaul in the prologue to his book 'Beyond Belief : Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples', of which a quotation is given in Chapter 11. This tearing depends not only on the erudition of the individual but also on the pre-Islamic or co-Islamic culture of the people. Here the Bengali Muslim could be termed as singularly unfortunate, burdened as he is with the wealth of literature - written mostly by Hindus - from the Chorjapod of the 11th century A.D. down to the incredible poetry of Rabindranath Tagore and the twentieth century writers, among whom there are quite a few Muslims too. This anguish of the erudite Bengali Muslim is not shared by, say, the Waziri or the Mohmand, simple, warlike, mostly illiterate mountain tribes of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province.

Then there is the personal factor. Some, like the liberal Muslim politicians such as Fazlul Haq and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (in his later years), definitely bore no animosity towards the Hindus, and helped them in whatever way they could. Others, like Abdul Monem Khan (Governor of East Pakistan, 1962-69) of the past, those of fundamentalist groups like Khaksar and Al-Badr of the liberation struggle days, and Golam Azam of the present, are quite the opposite. A very large number are ambivalent to different degrees, being just mildly disapproving of some of the habits of Hindus, such as their idol worship, or their eating of turtles. Such people would never go to the extent of actively hurting Hindus, but would not lift a finger either to protest against persecution of Hindus, nor mind enjoying the fruits of Hindu exodus. A very common method used by this ambivalent multitude for clearing their collective consciences was to tell themselves that nobody hurt the Hindus – they were leaving because they could not have their pre-independence position of pre-eminence, and they resented the fact that the Muslims were now their equals. In nurturing this belief they were helped, sadly enough, by the 'secular' Hindus of India – more on this subject in Chapter 10. But, even among the liberals among the Bengali Muslims, very, very few would go to the extent of publicly acknowledging the wrong done to the Hindus ; and still fewer of restoring the Hindus'

property back to them. One of these 'still fewer' happens to be Taslima Nasrin, which is basically why the entire fundamentalist establishment of Bangladesh has ganged up against her.

It must also be remembered that there were a substantial number of pro-Pakistan elements among the Bengali Muslims even while Bengali feelings ran the highest during the liberation war. The crimes against humanity committed by organisations like Al-Badr, Razakar and by people like the Imam of the Burra Masjid of Mymensingh (described by Taslima Nasrin in her Lojja – see chapter 9) were the handiwork of Bengali Muslims alone. The presence of the 'Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee' (Committee for the eradication of the killers and (Pakistani) stooges of 1971) in Bangladesh to this day show that they survive, and also that liberal Bangladeshi Muslims are alive to their existence and consider them a threat to their polity. This is why it has to be said that the proposition is never completely true for the multitude.

Next, there is, in the Bengali Muslim, an insatiable lust for land, which must be considered to understand the Muslim attitude towards Hindus. The bulk of the Bengali Muslims to this day are peasants, the majority of them landless agricultural labourers. In the pre-partition days a large number of Hindus in East Bengal were absentee landlords, living off a land that was tilled by his Muslim peasants. Following partition the land-hungry Muslim saw an Allah-sent opportunity to possess, legally, huge tracts of land belonging to the Hindus. Santosh Kumar Chanda[22]

mentions a common method of possessing Hindu land. At a time when the Hindus were suffering from extreme insecurity, some Muslims would appear as their protectors in exchange of land, to be sold of to them for a pittance. Then after some time they would disappear, and their place would be taken by another bunch of similar protectors who would ask for some more land. It was of course known that eventually the Hindu would leave, but the idea was to take over as much of his land with proper documentation for as little money as possible.

Finally, the irresistible appeal that Bengali Hindu women have for the Muslim male is a factor that must never be overlooked. This truth received official recognition from the aforementioned Governor Burrows, when he quipped with unspeakable cynicism and callousness that it was only natural that Hindu women would naturally be raped by the hundreds in Noakhali because they were prettier than their Muslim sisters. Muslim folk music from Mymensingh expresses a prayer to Allah : may Allah be so kind that the singer could marry the two semri (or chhemri, slang for young girls) who flank the Hindus' Durga idol – the semri being none other than Lakshmi and Saraswati, the Hindu Goddesses respectively of wealth and learning[23]

. The yearning to possess a Hindu woman drove Bengali Muslims to extraordinary lengths. And the things that stood in the way of this possessing were the Hindu male and the Hindu religion. These, therefore, needed to be removed.

A real-life story would be in order at this jumcture. Nupur Saha (nee Palchaudhuri), a

stunningly beautiful woman, got sent away to her aunt in India at the age of nine from her village in Bhojeswar, Madaripur, Faridpur because she was getting to be of age, and soon would become prey to Muslim males around. This, in spite of the fact that her father, Bijoy Palchaudhuri, was a 'Basic Democrat' (a kind of legislator in the constitutional system devised by Ayub Khan), and was more fortunately placed than most Hindus in regard to security of womenfolk.

This is not to say that the average Bengali Muslim was a land-grabber and a rapist. There are many examples of Hindus being saved from sure death by the efforts of Bengali Muslims from all levels of society, sometimes at the risk of their own lives. This is merely to point a finger at a relationship between two communities that is, at once, exceedingly complex and ever fluctuating. The traits mentioned above were there and are there in the Bengali Muslim. They cannot be wished away in the name of communal harmony, or by a one-sided view which only sees the good deeds that the Muslims did for the Hindus' sake.

A few words on the group generally known as 'Bihari Muslims' would be in order. As the name states, they were primarily Muslims from Bihar, but also include Muslims from the Eastern parts of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P., formerly United Provinces) and assorted Urdu-speaking Muslims from West Bengal. They emigrated in large numbers to East Pakistan in the days after 1947, and settled down mostly in the industrial towns such as Narayangunge and Chittagong, and the Railway towns of Santahar and Saidpur. They did not mix at all with the native Bengali Muslims, and in fact there was positive ill-feeling in certain parts of East Pakistan between the communities. Nrisingha Pati Changdar, a survivor of the Santahar train massacre (see Chapter 6) recalls that Bengali Muslims of the area around Santahar used to be quite scared of the Biharis. It is these Biharis who, rather than the West Pakistanis, committed most of the atrocities on Hindus, barring those of 1971.

When the Bangladesh liberation struggle started the Biharis, to a man, supported the Pakistanis, and became their most trusted lieutenants. After Pakistan lost the war they all wanted to get back to rump Pakistan. Now Pakistan did a neat volte-face and declared that it did not recognise any obligation to repatriate anyone of 'East Pakistani domicile' to West Pakistan. So the Biharis were caught neatly in a cleft stick. The Bangladeshi Muslims' animosity towards them was really intense, and even the pro-Pakistanis among the former could not come out in the open in defence of them. The result was that they began to get a taste of what they had practising on the Hindus so far. There were pogroms against them too, and they shut themselves into ghettoes such as Mirpur and Mohammedpur in Dacca. And dreaming of escaping to Pakistan.

But Pakistan was a thousand miles away, and they had to cross that much of Indian territory to reach there. Some of them tried even that, so bad was their state in Bengali Bangladesh. A few eventually succeeded, finally getting their dream shattered from landing up in slums like Orangi in Karachi where a murderous fight raged among Pathans, Mohajirs and Sindhis – they added a fourth element there, because even the

Urdu-speaking Mohajirs from western U.P. did not accept them as equals, and they continued to be called Biharis. Then they found an old refuge : India. And in particular the familiar states of Bihar and West Bengal. Thus they came full circle : having traveled from India driven by Hindu persecution or in the hope of finding an Islamic haven they settled down in East Pakistan and made room for themselves by butchering and driving out the Bengali Hindus. Then they lost their Pakistan and came back in large numbers to the state populated by the selfsame Bengali Hindus whose brethren they had once butchered and driven out.

And what did the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal do when they began to infiltrate into their state ? Very strangely, they pretended it was not happening, and looked the other way. Leftist politicos there with shady connections and Bihari Muslim roots[24]

, gave refuge to the infiltrators, gave them ration cards and identities and even Indian passports and settled them clandestinely on government land. Bihar itself was no different, and the same thing happened there. Then those who were secure brought in more, and with the numbers came Pakistani agents. With the result that today areas like Metiabruz and Rajabazar in Calcutta are Pakistani-Bihari ghettoes, and the demography of as many as four districts in Bihar – Purnea, Katihar, Araria and Kishanganj – has altered drastically in favour of Muslims.

How can a state suffer such a thing? It can, if it gets infected by something called Indian secularism, or more specifically the Left-Nehruvian interpretation of it, and love of the Muslim vote bank. This is developed further in Chapter10.

CHAPTER 4
[1] The Transfer of Power in India, ibid., p. 355

[2]

Jinnah of Pakistan, ibid. p. 322

[3]

Sir Eric Mieville, member of Lord Mountbatten’s staff, earlier Private Secretary to Lord Willingdon, Viceroy of India.

[4]

Jinnah of Pakistan, ibid. p. 323

127 Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee : A great life greatly lived : Article by K.R.Malkani, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Eminent Parliamentarians Monograph Series, Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1990, p. 32

[6]

Jinnah of Pakistan, ibid. p. 332

[7]

Aat Doshok, ibid. p.119

[8]

Rites of Passage, by Sanjoy Hazarika, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1st Ed., 2000, p. 73-74

[9]

India Wins Freedom, ibid. p. 184

[10]

(b. 1941), Electrical Engineer, Potomac, Maryland, U.S.A., interviewed October 2000.

[11]

The Transfer of Power in India, ibid., p. 388

[12] ibid.

[13]

(b. 1904), Retired Cement Technologist, ex-Manager, Assam Bengal Cement Co. Chhatak, Sylhet, interviewed January 21, 2000.

[14]

ibid.

[15]

Deshbhag, Deshtyag, (in Bangla, meaning Partition, Exodus), by Sandip Banerjee, Anushtup, Calcutta, 1st Ed., 1994, p. 51

[16] The question may arise as to why Suhrawardy, who had gone to such lengths to achieve Pakistan, was not in Dacca but in Calcutta on this day. Several theories are advanced, many of them based on Suhrawardy's West Bengali origin and his love for the city that had given him so many pleasures. However there are strong grounds to believe that he owned a lot of Benami property in the city which he was trying to dispose of before going to Pakistan. Benami means a system of ownership of property in India whereby the real owner is different from the ostensible owner (Benamdar). The system has now been abolished.

[17]Amrita Bazar Patrika (English daily of Calcutta, now ceased publication) 17th August, 1947, quoted in Deshbhag, Deshtyag ibid. . Amrita Bazar Patrika was the premier nationalist English daily from Calcutta in those days. It has since discontinued publication.

[18] Bengali authoress of repute, famous for her children's stories and humour, aunt of Satyajit Ray, the famous filmmaker. She also worked as a broadcaster for All India Radio for some time. The reference here is to her autobiographical sketch Pakdandi (in Bangla), Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1st Ed., 1986, p. 322.

[19] Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid., part III, p. 91

[20] The Transfer of Power in India, ibid., p. 431, 435

[21]

The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 : A Quest for Identity, by Rafiuddin Ahmed, ibid.

[22] Interviewed at different times, 2000-2001

[23] Lest any Indian 'Secular' Hindu should doubt this, the song (in local dialect) began with the words "Hindugo Dugga Puza, Balpata bhai buza buza . . . ." (The Hindus' Durga Puja is just a lot of bael leaves) and goes on to say "Daine bae duita semri poira ase

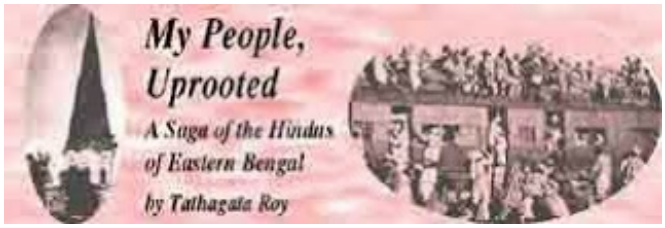
Daccai sari/ Allahe zodi doya korto Nikah kortam tare . . .” (Right and left of her [the Durga idol] two young girls in Daccai saris are standing – if only Allah was kind to me I would have married them).

[24] Typical of such politicos is a minister in the Left Front Government in West Bengal who is suspected of having resettled thousands of such infiltrators in West Bengal

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-5-1947-49-push-begins-gently-as.html

Chapter 5



1947-49 : THE PUSH BEGINS, GENTLY

As already explained at length, Bengali Hindu society was stratified by caste, with the Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas at the top of the pyramid, and the Baishya Sahas somewhere in the middle, but among the richest. It was these castes who felt the first pinch of partition and of being infidels in an Islamic Republic, and who were among the first to leave. These castes were the most dominant and the most powerful in the British days. They were also quite intelligent, and realised that not only would their power and dominance not last, but these would now work against them. Therefore they left. They were the smartest and also the early birds in the entire process, and therefore got the best possible deal. The infamous Nehru-Liaquat Pact (see Chapter 6) was not a reality yet, and a sizable number of Muslims in West Bengal were eager to go and settle in East Pakistan. Quite a few of these refugees therefore could exchange properties with Muslims leaving West Bengal. They did not depend on the state for rehabilitation. Conversely, the people of the State of West Bengal never realised what lay in wait for them – they thanked their stars that they had been spared the fate of Punjab.

It is not as if they left just having read the writing on the wall, without any provocation at all. There was persecution, mainly psychological to begin with, which later hardened into physical violence. Some examples have been recorded by two authors : Hiranmay Banerjee, and Sandip Banerjee. Hiranmay Banerjee was yet another officer of the ICS who was placed in charge of the Refugee Rehabilitation Department of the Government of West Bengal shortly after independence. He had recorded his reminiscences in a very well written book in Bangla titled ‘Udbastu’ (meaning ‘Refugee’)[1]. Sandip Banerjee took up the subject much later, in the nineties, and had done commendable research, leading to the publication of two short but important books[2]

, both in Bangla. There are things to be said about the approach of either author, and this has been sought to be done in Chapter10.

According to Hiranmay Banerjee the ‘Police Action’ in Hyderabad in India was one of the incidents that triggered atrocities against Hindus in East Bengal. Hyderabad was the largest ‘Native State’ in British India, with a overwhelmingly Hindu population speaking Telugu, Kannada or Marathi, but ruled by a Shia Muslim Urdu-speaking ruler called the Nizam, one of the richest men in the world. The Nizam, with some encouragement from Pakistan, tried to set up an independent, Muslim-ruled Hyderabad, and terrorised his

Hindu population with his all-Muslim militia known as Razakars. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister of India, also with the Home portfolio, sent in the Indian Army which easily overpowered the militia and disarmed them. The Nizam was later honourably rehabilitated, even made Rajpramukh (Governor) of the State of Hyderabad. The Muslims of East Bengal, practically all of them Sunnis, had never had anything to do at all with the Urdu-speaking, Shia Nizam. Yet the defeat of the Nizam fired anti-Hindu hysteria in East Bengal, with predictable results[3]

.

Hiranmay Banerjee describes several incidents in full, mostly in this period of 1947-1950, which he heard while serving as the Deputy Commissioner of the northern border district of Jalpaiguri, and visiting a refugee camp in the sub-divisional town of Alipurduar. In each of these incidents there was no physical violence but very acute psychological pressurising on a sensitive, cornered people. The most telling among the incidents runs as follows :

In rural Bengal there is no piped water supply, but water is abundantly available if one excavates a pond (called pukur) to a depth of about three metres. The usual manner of bathing for the people is therefore to wade out to neck-deep water and take several dips in such ponds. A daily bath, sometimes twice a day, is an essential item of personal hygiene in hot and humid Bengal. There was, and still to a large extent is, strict segregation of the sexes in the bathing process, and men and women either take bath at different ghats (steps going down into the water), or take bath at different times. These are matters of feminine modesty, and are required to be strictly observed.

Now it so happened in one of these incidents that whenever Hindu women went bathing in the village pond, large groups of Muslim men of all ages, would gather to surround the pond to watch them bathe, totally defying the conventional requirements of feminine modesty. They would then shout chants intended to embarrass, insult and intimidate the women. One of these chants went like this :

Pak, Pak, Pakistan (Holy, holy Pakistan)
Hindur bhatar Mussalman (Hindu women shall have Muslim husbands)

Then an elderly Muslim would advance and call to one of the Hindu women, addressing her as Bibi (wife), to get up and accompany him (there could be, and quite possibly was, a veiled sexual innuendo in the call, depending on the tone of the voice and the body language of the caller - author).

The entire crowd would guffaw at the acute discomfiture of the woman who would be standing stiff in neck-deep water, trembling all over, scared out of her wits. Then the elder would shout to one of the younger boys, pointing to the woman " I think your Chachi (aunt, insinuating that the woman was really his wife) has cramps in her legs. Why don't you go get her up and bring her home?"

This is where the story ended, as told by a fugitive to Hiranmay Banerjee[4]

. If there were worse things said or done no Hindu woman or a close relative would talk about it. In fact, in the social backdrop of 1947-48 saying even this much was quite out of the ordinary, and was obviously the result of a great deal of anguish in the narrator.

Dr. Brajesh Pakrashi[5]

, a successful cadiologist of Solon (a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio) recalls that his family were zamindars in the village of Sthal, Pabna. Following independence and partition there was no overt act of persecution, but 'there was an unease in the air'. The skeleton of a cow, evidence of the killing of a cow, considered a mortal sin by Hindus, was found one day in front of the village Kali temple. His family owned several guns (usually shotguns for hunting and muskets for protection). Shortly after partition the local Daroga (Police Chief) called on his father and showed an order of the government requiring their guns to be impounded. The elder Pakrashi handed over all their guns to the Daroga. The very next day he saw a young Muslim boy, who happened to be the son of an employee of the Zamindari, trying to shoot pigeons with one of the guns impounded the previous day. Upon questioning, the boy said, quite politely, that the Daroga had given him the gun for shooting. The Pakrashi clan got together the same night and decided that if a gun impounded by a government order and taken over by a police officer could be so carelessly lent for shooting pigeons, then dark days were indeed ahead. They decided to leave for India.

Another author, Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty, in a reference to this incident in his book 'The Marginal Men'[6]

has described the anguish of the Hindus as a community in very graphic terms. The Bhadralok class of East Bengali Hindus were the vanguard of the Ognijug, the era of fire of the Bengali revolutionaries (see Chapter 2), and had made untold sacrifices at that time, including quite a few going to the gallows. The intense yearning with which they had looked forward to independence can therefore only be imagined. Now the independence that had come to them had turned out to be a thousand times worse than British rule.

The attitude of Muslims towards the Hindus seemed to have changed almost overnight with independence. They adopted a policy of destroying totally the Hindus' sense of security by resorting to systematic persecution, especially in regard to the safety of their women. Still, the Hindus would have stuck on to their roots if only there had been some kind of fair administration in the country. In fact there was none. The openly partisan East Pakistani administration did not lift a little finger to restrain the Hindu-baiting Muslims. Therefore they had no recourse but to leave for India[7]

.

Sukomal Talukdar[8]

, born in the village of Bhabanipur, near Hathazari, Chittagong, now a U.S. citizen living near Seattle, Washington, recalls some of his earliest memories being those of Muslims raiding their property, forcibly taking away fish from their ponds, wood and fruits from their trees, and his elders discussing the matter helplessly. His sisters, in spite of being bright students, could not pursue their studies very far because Muslim boys used to tease them, sometimes threaten them. A stage came when it became downright dangerous for them to go to school, and they had to be given away in marriage quite early. Complaints made to the local thana (police station) brought forth the reply that if Hindus wanted to live in Pakistan this is the way they will have to live. The general idea was to create an atmosphere of extreme insecurity so that the Hindus left for India, and their property could be usurped by the Muslims.

Sandip Banerjee has narrated a number of incidents such as those experienced by Ms. Binapani Roy Chaudhuri, of village Joypur, Habiganj subdivision, Sylhet district. This is what she said : ”There had been no atrocities on Hindus in our village, but there was a lot of panic following the Noakhali carnage and 'Direct Action' in Calcutta. One day we all gathered together to hear the results of the referendum being announced on the radio. We were all very dejected to learn that Sylhet was going to Pakistan. . . . Our village had more Hindus than Muslims. The Hindus owned the land, the Muslims tilled it. Relations between the communities were quite acceptable. But as soon as the referendum results came out, panic spread among the Hindus. Muslims went around saying 'Let us first get Pakistan ; we shall then get even with the Hindus'. Independence Day for us was a very sad day. We passed the next few days in bated breath. Thefts and robberies started taking place in Hindu households. A girl from the Nyayaratna family was kidnapped and returned a few days later. The overall insecurity was too much to stand. I was then eleven years old. I was sent away to Shillong where my elder brother lived. For a few years we alternated between our village and Shillong. Then, in 1953, the Muslims set fire to our house and we all moved permanently to Shillong"[9]

.

A few Hindu festivals had made East Bengal famous. Two of these were the Janmashtami[10] processions of Dacca, and the Rath[11] festival of Dhamrai, a village near Dacca. The large concentration of Vaishnavas[12] among the moneyed Hindus of Dacca had made these events memorable. Within a month of independence Muslims attacked the Janmashtami processions in Dacca. The Rath mela of Dhamrai was closed down altogether and for good. Eventually, with the Hindus leaving Dacca town by the thousands, the Janmashtami processions also became a thing of the past. By 1949 the number of Durga Pujas[13] in Dacca town had also come down drastically. Posters were visible all over town against the pujas. On Vijaya Dashami day, the last day of the pujas, and a day for proclaiming brotherhood of all, Hindu households were set on fire by the hundreds, rendering as many as 750 Hindu families homeless. Saraswati Puja immersion[14]

processions were attacked in Patuakhali in Barisal.

At this stage the plight of the Hindu politicians who had chosen to stay on in East Pakistan should be mentioned. They had stayed on either because they thought they could provide leadership to, and influence the state in favour of the Hindus, or because they thought they would be in demand as leaders of a minority group. There were several of them, notable among them being Dhirendra Nath Datta, Kamini Kumar Datta (both of Comilla), Satindra Nath Sen, Jogendra Nath Mandal (both of Barisal), Basanta Das of Sylhet and Prabhas Chandra Lahiri of Rajshahi. All of them had to leave politics, some of them also this world, in pitiable states.

The case of Dhirendra Nath Datta was particularly sad. He had been a member of the Pakistani Parliament and Constituent Assembly, and had demanded National Language status for Bangla. Before this Jinnah had declared at Dacca that the national language of Pakistan shall be Urdu, and none should have any doubts about it. A number of youths, among them Shaikh Mujibur Rahaman, protested on his face. All these efforts ultimately culminated in the famous Language Agitation of 1952 in which, on 21st February several students were killed in a police firing. This day of 21st February is a National Day in Bangladesh. Dhirendra Nath Datta could, thus, be said to be one of the pioneers in the movement which gave rise to the independent Republic of Bangladesh.. During the holocaust of 1971 he was taken to Comilla cantonment by the Pakistani army, brutally tortured, and eventually killed. And how did the Bangladeshi state treat what was left of him? Datta was a moneyed person in Comilla, and his property was declared enemy property under the infamous law of that name (these laws have been discussed in detail in Chapter 7) - not in hostile Pakistan, but in independent Bangladesh, a country that he had helped come into being. When his legal representatives protested, the Judge ruled that his death certificate must be produced, failing which it must be presumed that he had escaped to India[15]

.

Jogendra Nath Mandal's was a different story. Ramsay Macdonald's communal award of 1932 had divided the Hindu community into 'caste' Hindus and 'Depressed Classes', though no such distinction was made between Sunni and Shia Muslims. The idea was obviously to keep Hindu society divided as far as possible. Jogendra Nath Mandal of Barisal emerged as a leader of this class and was asked by the Muslim League to join their ministry in 1937. This was so far beyond Mandal's expectations that he became a virtual slave of the Muslim League, and was used by them to whitewash the misdeeds of the League vis-à-vis Mandal's own community. This is what Mandal did after the Noakhali carnage of 1946 where there were a large number of depressed caste Hindus among the victims of Golam Sarwar's goons. He also opposed Syama Prasad Mookerjee's proposal of partitioning Bengal, and called it a conspiracy of caste Hindus against the Depressed Classes and Muslims. For all this he was rewarded with a ministerial berth in independent Pakistan's central cabinet and was given the portfolio of Law and Labour.

However, the pogrom of 1950 was too much even for such a person to digest. He came over to Dacca from the national capital of Karachi on 10th February, and saw for himself the terrible misdeeds of the Muslims. He then travelled to his home district of Barisal,

and saw the bestialities committed by the Muslims in villages like Muladi, Madhabpasha and Lakutia. He decided to take up the matter with Liaquat Ali upon his reeturn to Karachi. Liaquat Ali said Mandal was exaggerating minor incidents beyond all proportions and threatened to throw him jail if he did not keep quiet. Now Mandal had had enough, and also smelt that his end in Pakistani politics was near. He kept quiet for a while, surreptitiously ran away and came to Calcutta in October 1950, and refused to go back to Pakistan again. His letter of resignation sent to Liaquat Ali is a historical document, and is given in the appendix to this book.

Satindra Nath Sen was a Congress leader of Barisal. He had chosen to stay on in East Pakistan and to try to persuade other Hindus to stay on. He failed. He was later incarcerated by the East Pakistan government, and died a prisoner. Basanta Das and Prabhas Chandra Lahiri were, to use a contemporary term, EBDO-ed (driven out of politics by Ayub Khan's Elected Bodies Disqualification Order, issued following his promulgation of Martial Law in 1958), and had to flee to India.
The fear of molestation, rape and kidnapping of Hindu women was one of the principal reasons for the Hindus to leave East Pakistan at this stage. Young, and even not-so-young Hindu women were finding it increasingly difficult to step out of doors for fear of jeers, catcalls and lewd and intimidating gestures by Muslim men. Instances of burglaries, thefts and robberies on Hindu households were increasing. As always, even in these activities Hindu women were invariably a subsidiary target.

Complaining to the Pakistani police was usually pointless. They were found to be either inert or openly partisan in favour of the Muslims. Sunil Ganguly mentions in his novel Purba-Pashchim a case when a Judge from West Bengal goes back to his village Malkhanagar in the Bikrampur region of the district of Dacca for a visit. His property there has been looted twice by masked robbers who had made only a show of hiding their faces, and had warned him that they would kill him the next time he dared to visit Malkhanagar. He goes to complain to the Police Station. The officer there is not bothered, and tells him 'Oh, so you don't have robberies in Hindusthan[16]! Then why don't you go there?'[17]

Fear of forcible conversion, invariably accompanied by a forced meal of beef, was another fear. This had been widely practised in the Noakhali carnage. Destruction of standing crops belonging to Hindus was yet another technique of forcing the Hindus to leave. The bulk of trade and commerce was still in Hindu hands, especially retail trade. Boycotting of Hindu stores had become a regular feature. Once the moneyed Hindus left the artisan class dependent on their custom also left, for the Muslims would not or could not patronise them. A classic example of these was a gentleman called Sisir Dhuli of Barisal whose ancestral occupation was to beat the Dhak (a kind of drum) at Durga and other Puja times. With the Hindus leaving there would be no more Durga Pujas and no custom for him. Therefore he had also left.

And of course there were murders, pure and simple and gruesome. Shubhoranjan

Dasgupta, a reporter of the popular Calcutta Bangla daily Ananda Bazar Patrika, found and reported[18] evidence as late as in the year 2000 when he had gone to Vrindavan[19]

to do a feature on Bengali widows there. Ms. Ila Banerjee, 86 when she was interviewed, was the wife of a doctor with a thriving practice in the village of Barandipara in Jessore. They had three sons – the eldest about to sit for his matriculation, the next in class five, the youngest in class four. One fateful day in 1947 they all went to the market together, and never came back. Ila and her husband traveled to Vrindavan, and lived the rest of their lives there, trying to drown their immeasurable sorrow in religion, chanting Radha-Krishna for their waking hours, and occasionally not being able to help breaking out into sobs. Likewise, Dasgupta found in the same Vrindavan, Radhadasi Baidya (70, from Bishnupur, Khulna), Kiranbala Haldar (70, Hausdi, Faridpur), Gopika Saha (66, Noakhali town, Noakhali), Chapalasundari Dhar (90, Dakkhinbaria, Noakhali), Sushila Dey (80, Habiganj, Sylhet), still-living monuments to Islamic holocaust in Eastern Bengal.

There were protests against the atrocities in the newspapers of Calcutta, and in those of East Bengal still in Hindu hands. The paper 'Deshapriya' of Barisal reported that Hindus were leaving for India by the villagefuls only in order to live with dignity. A letter to the editor of that paper reported that fear of forcible conversion was one of the chief motivating factors behind leaving their country. The Ananda Bazar Patrika of 20th October, 1948 observed that while there was no widespread rioting in East Pakistan, there was boycotting of Hindu traders, intimidation of Hindus, and an all-pervading atmosphere of fear, which were the principal factors in making the Hindus leave East Pakistan. On 24th October the same paper reported that Hindus were leaving East Pakistan in hordes. According to Dr. B.C. Roy their number was around 1,500,000 ; according to Suresh Chandra Banerjee, a Congress leader of West Bengal, the number so far exceeded 2,000,000. On 29th October the same paper enumerated the main reasons for the exodus to be as follows :

1. Lack of representation of Hindus in the administrative apparatus of East Pakistan.
2. Absence of Hindu officers in the Police and the Army.
3. Forcible occupation of Hindu properties.
4. Arrest and internment without trial of Hindus.
5. Forcible searches of Hindu households without reason.
6. Boycott of Hindu traders.
7. A food crisis and general economic malaise.

It is true that at the time there was a general economic crisis in East Pakistan principally due to the dislocation created by partition, whereas West Bengal, being part of the large Indian economy did not suffer from any such problems. Standard rice cost Rs. 50 per maund at the time in East Bengal, whereas the corresponding price was around Rs. 21 in West Bengal. It is believed that at the time some Muslims also left East Bengal for West because of this reason. Still, it is difficult to agree with the enumeration of the reasons for leaving home by Hindus as given by Ananda Bazar Patrika. The central, paramount, fundamental reason that forced the Hindus to leave their home and hearth of many

centuries could have only been a total, all-pervading, deep-seated, profound insecurity. Insecurity as to their life, liberty and pursuit of happiness ; insecurity as to their freedom to practise their religion and their way of life; and more than anything else, insecurity as to the safety of their women[20]

According to Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti the geography of Eastern Bengal had its part to play in the insecurity. The whole of Eastern Bengal is a delta, criss-crossed by innumerable rivers, canals and major and minor water courses. Every bit of land is thus, in a sense, an island, approachable usually by river craft (and, in some districts like Barisal, only by river craft). The Hindus lived in these islands in an isolated, scattered way. It was not easy for them to escape when set upon suddenly by a marauding Jihad-crazed mob. The Hindu-hatred of the East Bengali Muslims had reached such a pitch that most Hindus considered it better to leave instead of waiting for that mob to arrive[21]

.

Sandip Banerjee has overplayed the aspect of change of way of life in prompting the affluent, socially forward and dominant Hindus to leave. According to him the principal reason behind the Hindus leaving East Bengal in the first phase of 1948-49 was their refusal to accept the reality that from now on the Muslims would be their equals, and the Muslims, not they, would henceforth rule society, economics and politics. A critique of his approach and that of other commentators is at Chapter 10. Quite apart from his approach however, it is a fact that the non-acceptance of Muslim domination did play a part in inducing the Hindus to leave. Hiranmay Banerjee has also cited a number of cases of such non-acceptance, and they need to be placed on record.

A Brahmin of Bikrampur decided to leave for India because an influential Muslim gentleman of his village paid him a visit and sat down on a bench, whereas before independence he always used to sit on a mat on the floor. Well-to-do Hindus were disturbed by the fact that Muslims now stood straight before them and looked them in the eye when they talked. In village Kakdwip, under Palang Police Station, Madaripur subdivision of Faridpur district, Hindus left partly from fear of Muslim vendetta against insults done to them earlier[22]. Muslims would walk up to Hindu gentlemen and tell them 'This is Pakistan -- you can't ignore us any longer as insignificant'. A Hindu gentleman had bought the last remaining sack of fine rice from a shop, and was in the process of picking it up when a Muslim mukhtar (a kind of lawyer) came and picked up the sack and claimed it. When the Hindu protested the Muslim said 'Of course I'll take it! What do you think-- is this Hindusthan'?[23]

Both Hiranmay Banerjee and Sandip Banerjee have blamed the exodus to a significant extent on the refusal of the Hindus to face reality, and on their guilt for their past misdeeds. Granted both were present, were these enough reasons for leaving one's home of centuries for a totally uncertain future in a strange land? Or were these merely

subsidiary reasons, or at most the primary reason for only a few affluent Hindus? And did the act of leaving East Pakistan for India at the first hint of trouble show an alarmist nature or over-sensitivity?

Or did it show remarkable foresight? Shirshendu Mukherjee, another popular contemporary Bengali novelist of West Bengal, in his novel Ghoonpoka, has described the lament of Kamalaksha Chakravarty, a poor Brahmin of village Banikhara, Bikrampur: "We should have left for India while there was still time (presumably for exchanging property etc.), staying on here has been a great mistake".

The role of roving Muslim loot, murder and rape squads – some sort of Muslim League storm troopers – needs to be mentioned in this context. They included both Bihari and Bengali Muslims. That they were allowed to have a free run of everything possessed by Hindus, including their persons, is beyond doubt. They made it a practice to harass, loot and kill Hindus leaving for India, because a large number of them could be found concentrated in a train or steamer and would be carrying with them most of their valuables – usually gold, silver, money, even kansha (bell-metal) utensils. The fleeing Hindus were easy prey, with the Pakistani police either not visible or looking the other way. Together with looting the refugees there would be fringe benefits for them too, for they would get to paw nubile Hindu girls and women. Trains going to India were a favourite target of theirs, because they would find a large number of Hindus, including Hindu girls, within small confines. The massacres at Santahar and Dacca (Fulbari) stations and on Meghna Bridge were all done in trains. Unless it was in a very visible place, they would often drag away such girls, quite a few of whom would then disappear forever. Such women were often raped and then killed, or just left lying where they were after being raped, eventually to land up in a brothel or as the fourth wife of some village Mollah[24]

somewhere deep in the interior of rural East Pakistan.

The total number of Hindu refugees who arrived in India from East Pakistan in this phase (earlier than 31st December 1949) and sought state rehabilitation is given as 2,304,514 by Hiranmay Banerjee[25]

. This does not include Hindus who rehabilitated themselves, or Hindus who were in West Bengal before partition and never went back.

How much property did the Hindus lose in East Bengal? There is no data at all, but a methodology for determination has been suggested at Chapter 10. To have an idea, consider the following excerpt from a speech by Dr. Meghnad Saha in the Indian Parliament "Now take the city of Dacca, the biggest city in Eastern Pakistan, it had a population of 200,000 before partition, 70 per cent were Hindus – 140,000. They owned 80 per cent of the houses there. Now there are only 5,000 Hindus left there and they have been completely forced out of their houses in Dacca. I know it, because I come from Dacca"[26]

.

Refugee movements started abating in 1949, and a lot of people thought that the worst was over. In truth only the first phase of this movement ended, to be followed in 1950 onwards by a much worse, bloodier phase.

CHAPTER 5

[1] Udbastu (in Bangla, meaning 'Refugee'), by Hiranmay Banerjee, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta,1st Ed.,1970

[2] Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid.; Deshbhag : Sriti aar Satta , (in Bangla, meaning Partition : Memories and Existence) by Sandip Banerjee, , Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 1st Ed.,1999

[3] Udbastu, ibid., p. 333

[4] ibid., p.15

[5] Interviewed November 5, 2000

[6] 'The Marginal Men' by Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty, Naya Udyog, Calcutta, 2nd Ed., 1999. The book was also published in its Bangla version entitled Prantik Manab, Pratikshan Publications Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1st. Ed., 1997

[7]

ibid., p. 16

[8] Interviewed November 2000

[9] Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid. p. 56

[10] Janmashtami is the celebration of birth of Lord Krishna (the author of the Bhagavad Gita) on the eighth day of the moon in the month of Bhadra.

[11]

Rath literally means a chariot on which Lord Jagannath rides. Rath festival is associated with its melas, village fairs which were irresistible to the village children. Attacks on the melas by Muslims are notorious for the atrocities committed on these children. See Sunil Ganguly's Purba-Pashchim ibid. p. 418

[12]

A Vaishnava is a worshipper of the Hindu God Vishnu, the keeper of the universe, one of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara, Brahma being the creator and Maheswara the destroyer. The Vaishnavas of Bengal, not very numerous, are characterised by their pacifism, vegetarianism (not common among Bengali Hindus), and certain rituals.

[13] Durga is the ten-armed Hindu Goddess embodying the strength of all the Gods for combating the evil demon, the Buffalo-bodied Mahishasura. Durga Puja (community worship) is now the main annual festival of Bengali Hindus, and is celebrated over four days, usually in October.

[14] Saraswati is the Hindu Goddess of learning . After a Puja of a particular deity, Saraswati or Durga, the image is immersed in the nearest river with a lot of pomp and ceremony.

[15]

Deshbhager Golpo (Stories of the Partition), by Salaam Azad, 1st Ed., Mitra & Ghosh, Calcutta, p. 42-43.

[16]

Pakistanis often refer to India as 'Hindusthan', though in a strict sense the term applies only to the Gangetic Plain of North India.

[17]

Purba-Pashchim, ibid. p. 93

[18]

Ananda Bazar Patrika (Bangla), Calcutta, April 11, 2000. Ananda Bazar Patrika is a Bangla daily from Calcutta, of the ABP group, then as well as now the most circulated one, and currently with the highest circulation among all Indian language dailies in India.

[19]

Vrindavan is a village on the Yamuna River, near Mathura in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The village is very holy to Hindus for being associated with Lord Krishna, the author of the Bhagavad Gita, and his lady love, Radha. It was a popular destination, for

elderly religious Bengali Hindus, especially widows, who wanted to spend their last days in communion with Radha-Krishna. Varanasi or Banaras was also equally popular, except that the presiding deity there was Lord Shiva.

[20]

All these incidents were reported in different newspapers and journals and quoted in Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid. p. 57-59

[21]

Prantik Manab, ibid., p. 16

[22]

Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid. p. 61-62

[23]

Udbastu, ibid. p. 14

[24]

A Mollah (or Mullah) is a Muslim clergyman who leads the five-times-a-day prayers at the mosque. Bengali Muslims are practically all Hanafi Sunnis, and unlike Shia Muslims the Sunnis have no organised clergy. However, to the largely illiterate village Muslims the Mollah's word is law.

[25]

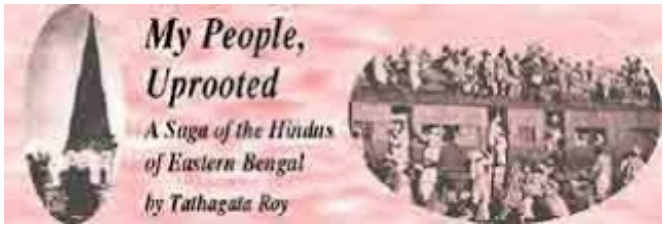
Udbastu, ibid. p. 343

[26] Speech in Parliament (Lok Sabha) on the West Bengal Evacuee Property (Tripura Amendment) Bill, November 27, 1952. Lok Sabha Debates, Part II, 2nd Session, Vol.5, 1313-15. 1952. Meghnad Saha in Parliament, Santimoy Chatterjee and Jyotirmay Gupta Ed., Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1st Ed. 1993, p.220

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-6-push-comes-to-shove-killings.html

Chapter 6



PUSH COMES TO SHOVE : THE KILLINGS OF 1950, AND THE NEHRU-LIAQUAT PACT

The reason for which the Hindus left East Pakistan before 1950 was largely insecurity. Most of them were relatively affluent, upper-caste urban Hindus from the big towns like Dacca, Chittagong, Mymensingh or Rajshahi. They were mostly zamindars, mercantile employees, professionals, businessmen and the like. They were politically alert, could see the future with considerable clarity, and had no illusions about what lay in store for them in the fledgling Islamic Republic.

Consequently, they were the people who got the best possible deals – under the circumstances. Quite a few of them could manage to exchange property with Muslims from West Bengal. Even here they got an unfair deal. In Rajlakshmi Debi's Bangla novel Kamal-lata there is a conversation described between a Hindu from Mymensingh town and a Muslim from a Calcutta suburb sometime just after partition. In the process of haggling the Muslim says "Excuse me, but your position and ours are not the same. So long as Mahatma Gandhi is alive we have no fears. But you won't be able to live here much longer"[i]

.

On the other hand the Hindus' exodus of 1950 and afterwards was running for dear life, plain and simple ; together, of course, with trying to save their womenfolk from rape, molestation and forcible marriage to Muslims. The refugees of this time included some urban Hindus who had decided to 'wait and watch' and had dubbed the earlier refugees as 'alarmist'. However the bulk of them were middle and lower-middle class rural folk, as well as small traders, weavers, artisans, fishermen, cultivators and the like who were strewn all over the vast delta of East Bengal, literally in little Hindu islands in a Muslim sea. North Bengal (Rajshahi, Pabna, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra) was marginally less affected compared to the delta.

Hiranmay Banerjee was, at this time, the District Magistrate of 24-Parganas[ii]. In early January 1950 reports reached Calcutta that organised persecution and uprooting of Hindus, at the hands of Muslims had started in the Bagerhat area of Khulna district. According to Sandip Banerjee it began with a skirmish between a procession and the police[iii]

. Khulna, it would be remembered, was a Hindu-majority district at the time of partition – it was given to Pakistan in exchange of the Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad which went to India in consideration of the necessity of keeping the headwaters of Calcutta port in Indian control. There were a large number of Hindus in the district, and naturally a large number were affected. The persecution had taken the form of rioting, beating, and grievous injuries, some of such injuries resulting in deaths. Riots started in West Bengal in retaliation.

According to Abdul Mohaimen, the problem which started from the Kalshira village of the Bagerhat area of Khulna on December 20, 1949, had nothing to do with Hindus or Muslims. It began with a clash between the Communists and the police. The Communists killed some policemen, in retaliation of which the police destroyed the houses of some villagers some of whom were Hindus. These Hindus migrated to Calcutta and spread a rumour of atrocities on Hindus which resulted in atrocities on Muslims in West Bengal, which finally triggered the near-holocaust of Hindus in East Bengal. Sandip Banerjee, while quoting Mohaimen, and while acknowledging that some exaggerated accounts were published in the West Bengal press, states categorically that none of these things can mitigate the guilt of the East Bengal Muslims in the systematic and wholesale slaughter and the uprooting of Hindus[iv]

.

For an authentic version of the Kalshira incident, paragraph 15-17 of the letter of resignation of Jogendra Nath Mandal, Pakistan's Central Minister for Law and Labour till October 1950, ought to be seen. This letter has been reproduced in the Appendix.

So far the only serious study done on the subject of persecution of minorities in East Bengal culminating in a book is by A.J.Kamra, and the book is titled 'The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms'[v]

. This is truly a piece of pioneering work, and the study could have been much more rounded and comprehensive were it not to be terminated by Kamra's death. When he died the book was still in the form of a draft, and it was given the shape of a book by Dr. Koenraad Elst, the Belgian researcher who can truly be called the nearest thing to being a Simon Wiesenthal of Hindus in India, indeed of all peoples who have suffered Islamic persecution. Because of this shortcoming the sources of a lot of information is not mentioned, but they all have the ring of truth. Kamra apparently knew no Bangla, (nor does Elst) but the care and meticulousness with which he had scanned the available material in English and recorded the same deserve unstinted praise.

Kamra has recorded the observations of Wilfred Lazarus, staff correspondent of the Press Trust of India (the premier news agency of India) which are reproduced below. These are first-hand observations - Lazarus had visited Kalshira village at considerable personal risk. As will be seen, they differ very substantially from Mohaimen's account.

"A police party of four was sent to Kalshira and raided one of the houses suspected to be

a Communist hideout. Women in the house raised an alarm against police high-handedness (it was established that the police had tried to rape the women). Nine men responded to their alarm and clashed with the police. One policeman died on the spot and two others were injured seriously. This incident happened after nine in the night. Two days later a party of policemen under the Superintendent of Police arrived on the spot and assisted by Ansars and Muslim mobs started large-scale looting of the houses in the village. Most of the villagers of Kalshira were Scheduled Caste Hindus.

The trouble soon spread to several other neighbouring villages. Even according to the most sober reports, utter lawlessness prevailed in these villages for a few days and the whole of Bagerhat subdivision went through a reign of terror. Some of the inhabitants of villages fled for their lives, leaving everything behind, and crossed over to West Bengal, while others were unable to escape because of a steel ring thrown round the villages by the local police and the Ansars.

It was after the matter was raised in the Indian Parliament that the East Bengal government issued an official communiqué on February 3, almost six weeks after the incident. Even today, two and a half months after the incident, a visit to this place is difficult and can only be undertaken at great personal risk.

Destruction in areas like Backergunge, Khulna, Mymensingh, Chittagong, and Sylhet has been thorough and on a wide scale. There was no retaliation whatsoever from the members of the minority community, as almost all of them had been dispossessed of their arms after partition"[vi]

.

Ashok Mitra has advanced an economic reason for the atrocities to begin. According to him the balance of trade between the two countries was heavily in favour of Pakistan in 1947-48 and 1948-49 ; in other words during these two financial years (1st April to 31st March) Pakistani exports to India, mainly raw jute, were far in excess of Indian exports to Pakistan, mainly coal. On 18th September 1949 the British pound sterling was devalued in comparison with the United States Dollar by about a third, and India devalued its Rupee to the same extent the very next day. As a result the value of Pakistani exports fell, and Pakistan refused to send some fifty thousand bales of raw jute already loaded on to barges for which India had paid in advance. All traffic by rail or inland waterway gradually came to a complete standstill and from 16th December 1949 there was sine die total suspension of trade. India's main export to East Pakistan was coal of which there wasn't a grain there, and stoppage of supply by India caused havoc in East Pakistan. Coupled with this there were disputes regarding sharing of canal waters in the west, between East and West Punjab. This began to worry the Pakistani administration, and their solution for this was to put the blame on the East Pakistani Hindus and drive them out.

Ashok Mitra as an ICS officer was definitely privy to what was going in East Pakistan at that time, but he has chosen to make only a passing reference to the tragedy. According

to him atrocities against Hindus started in Dacca and Khulna from the second week of February 1950. These took the form mainly of murder, arson and forcible conversion of Hindus to Islam. There was curfew in Dacca town from dusk to dawn from 10th till 20th February. Nehru came to Calcutta on 6th March, and again on 16th March to see the plight of the refugees, and made an appeal to Liaquat Ali to call a halt to the atrocities. At first there was no response. Meanwhile anti-Muslim riots started in the industrial town of Howrah, and took a serious turn on 26-27th March. It is then that Liaquat Ali, on 29th March 1950 made his first conciliatory gesture in a speech at Karachi, and expressed his intention to travel to New Delhi on 2nd April to work out a solution with Nehru[vii]

.

The letter of resignation of Jogendra Nath Mandal, reproduced in full in the appendix, gives a comprehensive observation of the origin and development of the pogroms of 1950 by a person in considerable de jure authority and freedom of movement. Jogendra Nath Mandal, from Barisal, was a leader of the depressed classes who was snared into a partnership with the Muslim League during the pre-independence years. Once Pakistan was achieved the Muslim League showed its true colours. Even so, Mandal stuck to them for quite some time, having been made Pakistan's Central minister for Law and Labour. However, the pogrom of 1950 was too much even for him. He fled to India, and from there sent his resignation to Liaquat Ali. As the letter reveals, the economic reason pointed out by Ashok Mitra was but one of the many reasons for the 1950 pogroms. Mandal mentions it last of all.

Meanwhile Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the legendary physician, had replaced Prafulla Chandra Ghosh as the Chief Minister of West Bengal. Dr. Roy was a go-getter par excellence, and was capable of taking very hard decisions, and also of owning up if something went wrong. He also had formidable powers of persuasion. He immediately mobilised the police force and the military to quell the disturbances in West Bengal. As the District Magistrate of 24-Parganas the bulk of the work had to be done by Hiranmay Banerjee. In a very short time the situation was brought under control and atrocities against Muslims ceased in West Bengal.

But both Banerjee and Dr. Roy apprehended that the converse would not cease so easily in East Bengal, and in fact it did not. A meeting was arranged between the Chief Secretaries of the two Bengals. Sukumar Sen of the ICS (Later India’s first Chief Election Commissioner) was the Chief Secretary of West Bengal at the time, and he traveled to Dacca, and came back with very bad news. He said that an enormous refugee influx was in the offing, whose number could go up to a million.

While at Dacca he had to witness a curious incident. On February 7, 1950 a large group of Muslim women in bloodstained clothes were paraded before him inside the Secretariat. According to the letter of resignation of Jogendra Nath Mandal, Pakistan's central minister for Law and Labour (see Appendix), on February 10, a woman was painted in red to show that her breasts had been cut off by a Hindu mob in Calcutta, and taken round the East Bengal secretariat. Immediately the secretatriat employees struck

work, and came out baying for revenge against the Hindus. All this while Sukumar Sen was closeted with his East Bengal counterpart in the secretariat. The secretariat employees then went in a procession to Victoria Park where rabid anti-Hindu speeches were made. The mob then fanned out and began to loot Hindu shops and killing Hindus indiscriminately. Mandal arrived at Dacca from Karachi the same day, and came to know that all these atrocities had been committed in the presence of high police officials[viii]

. He could, however, do nothing, and as will be seen later, was forced to resign and flee to India. When this was the state of a minister of Pakistan's central cabinet, the state of the Hindu on the street can easily be imagined.

As apprehended, the exodus began soon enough. It was a deluge of humanity, driven out of their home and hearth of centuries by unimaginable inhumanity, perpetrated in the name of Jihad, and of establishing in East Pakistan Dar-ul-Islam, meaning, ironically, Land of Peace. It has been said that Islam neither endorses nor condones the killing, raping or uprooting of non-believers, and quite possibly it is true. Perhaps the people who did the atrocities were not aware of it. In any case these tenets were of no consequence to the hapless millions who did not subscribe to Islam, and who suffered as a result thereof at the hands of those who professed Islam. There was, apparently, also a strange dearth observed at the time of Islamic scholars who could have put the errant believers wise. Unlike what Shamsuddin did after the Noakhali carnage, no Islamic cleric in Pakistan appears to have gone on record to state that what was being done was against the tenets of their religion. And if any cleric in India said so it could have only been from an instinct for survival and did not have the slightest effect on the East Pakistanis.

What brought about all these mayhem? The Kalshira incident has already been mentioned, but the most dominant factor seems to have been the encouragement given by the official media. On February 6 and 7, Radio Pakistan gave a direct call to prepare and take action by a repeated announcement : "Brethren! You have heard about the inhuman atrocities that are now being perpetrated on our brother Muslims in India and West Bengal! Will you not gather strength"? Radio Pakistan further announced that 10,000 Muslims had already been killed in Calcutta, and a local daily, Pashban, increased this figure to 100,000. Later, at the time of signing of the Nehru-Liaquat pact Radio Pakistan corrected these figures of the number of Muslims killed at Calcutta to - twenty[ix]

.

Some of the worst atrocities took place in the coastal district of Barisal, also known as Backergunge, now consisting of the districts of Barisal, Bhola, Pirojpur, Barguna, Patuakhali and Jhalakati of present-day Bangladesh. Barisal is literally a maze of perennial rivers, canals and water courses, with the result that it was one of the very few districts of British India without an inch of Railway line. To reach Barisal from the provincial capital of Calcutta one had to take a train to Khulna, and at Khulna board a steamer for an overnight voyage to Barisal. The soil of the district is incredibly fertile, and being close to the sea, conducive to cultivation of coconut, a cash crop. Everybody in the

district who had even a chhitak (about 45 square feet) of land would grow paddy and coconut in profusion, without any fertiliser, with the minimum of labour. As a result, the people of the district were relatively well-to-do, the Hindus more so because of their white-collar occupations coupled with their landed wealth.

Barisal was the abode of the intellectual clans of the Guha Thakurta-s and the Ghosh Dastidar-s of Banaripara and Gabha villages respectively. It also had a strong Baidya community, with the names of Sengupta and Dasgupta, the only caste of doctors to be found anywhere in Hindu India. These people followed the hereditary practice of Ayurveda, the ancient Hindu science of medicine, which had given the world legendary physicians like Susruta and Charaka, and pathbreaking drugs such as Sarpagandha (Rawoulfia Serpentina), one of the first drugs to combat hypertension. The Baidyas had migrated in large numbers to cities like Calcutta and Dacca, and had become a very urbane and sophisticated people, a large number among whom followed intellectual pursuits. The district was also the home of a large number of lower-caste Namahsudras and Kaibartas who were into fishing and allied trades.

The scythe of Islamic persecution cut across the entire lot of all these communities. Because of the topography of the area, and the distance from the Indian border it was relatively more difficult for these people to get away from the marauders. Consequently some of the most heartrending tales were heard from these parts.

Sandip Banerjee describes one such incident. In an interview with Sukumar Mukherjee of Calcutta, formerly of village Rajpur, near Jhalakati, Banerjee was told that at the time of partition Sukumar was working in Calcutta. He tried, but failed to persuade his father to leave his village and migrate to India and live with him. His father's argument was typical : 'If we have lived with the British so long why shouldn't we be able to live with the Muslims? They're not more alien than the British, are they?'

But three years later, in the spring of 1950, none of these fancy arguments were of any avail. It was the day preceding Shivaratri, the night when Hindu married women traditionally observe a fast and pray for the good of their husbands. On this warm March day the falling darkness of the evening was rent by the crazed shouting of a Muslim mob and the blaze of fire. Hindu households were being torched. Someone ran and informed the police station. It was of no use, no one did anything. When the mob and the fire began to draw near most of the Mukherjee family went up to their terrace so as not to be burnt alive – but not Sukumar Mukherjee's father and his elder brother. They sat inside, their faith in humanity growing shakier by the minute, mumbling to themselves 'why should they attack us, we have done nothing to them!'

The people on the terrace could hear their door being forced, their house being set on fire. Their neighbours, the Sarkars and the Gangulys, were also attacked. The houses were ransacked. The marauders went about the business totally unhindered by any state machinery. In all nine Hindus, including a niece of Sukumar, and a few from the neighbouring families were beheaded. The severed heads were neatly arranged on the

stairs, one on each step. Sukumar's father's elder brother was burnt alive, his father and his own elder brother seriously injured from stab wounds. His mother was hit on the waist with a Laja, a sort of cutlass.

Sukumar was at Calcutta then. He read about the killings of East Bengal, and especially in Barisal, in Calcutta newspapers but could do nothing for his family. The only thing he could do and used to do was to go to Sealdah station every day looking for known faces, and to see if anyone from his family was there. One day he came home and heard that his family had arrived and were with a relative. He ran, and found his mother, sister, sister-in-law in an unimaginable state. They had carried only the clothes on their backs[x]

.

The scenes of two of the most horrendous killings were the villages of Muladi and Madhabpasha, both in Barisal or Backergunge district. Muladi, and important riverine port, was the home of several hundred Hindus. When torching of their houses started all the Hindus flocked to the Police Station for shelter. They were then attacked and the whole lot of them were killed in the precincts of the Police Station. The Officer-in-charge was found to have been in possession of large quantities of jewellery and similar valuables looted from the hapless Hindus. An old Hindu schoolteacher, a bachelor, was roasted alive by his own students, young Muslim boys who danced around the fire in glee. At Madhabpasha, under Babugunge Police Station, some two to three hundred Hindus were rounded up by a bloodthirsty Muslim mob, made to squat in a row and had their heads chopped off one by one with a ramda (a sort of axe)[xi]

.

News of incidents such as these spread fast and caused widespread panic among the Hindus and forced them to leave their home en masse. Sailabala Sen of village Raipur, Netrokona, district Mymensingh was a Barui, the caste that makes a living out of growing and selling betel leaves (Paan). She had lost two children from disease, but was keeping herself busy with her betel cultivation. One night she was told by breathless neighbours that a huge mob of Muslims was on the way to set fire to her whole village, including the palatial house of the Hindu zamindar, and all Hindus better run for their lives without delay. No one thought of going to the police – by now Hindus had lost all faith in the Pakistani police. Sailabala and her family immediately gathered their valuables in a few bundles. They debated for a short time whether they would go for the nearest border of Garo Hills (now a part of the Indian state of Meghalaya) or go to faraway West Bengal. They decided in favour of the latter, for the Garo Hills were forested, without any infrastructure, full of wild elephants, and were moreover not a Bengali-speaking area. So she set out into the night with her bundles, leaving behind her home with her utensils strewn about in the kitchen waiting to be washed the following morning, her bed made, her mosquito-net strung up, her last night's panta bhaat (stale, slightly fermented rice) still in its pitcher, her cow tethered to a post.

Travelling to West Bengal from Netrokona was, however, not easy. She traveled to the

railway station and sat waiting there for her train, cowering in fear of the mob, at the same time with her heart torn away by the pain of leaving her home and the memory of her dead children. She took the morning train to Bahadurabad Ghat (river port) and boarded the ferry steamer to cross the enormous Jamuna river and board another train on the other bank at Sirajgunge. Then the next morning she detrained at Sealdah. Eyes streaming tears, and a heart as heavy as lead, she took up residence in an abandoned barrack of what used to be a hospital complex of the U.S. Army during the war in the Lake area of South Calcutta. Later she took up employment as a domestic help.

The existing means of transportation proved to be totally inadequate to move the huge mass of uprooted humanity. Sandip Banerjee was told by Ms. Shanta Sen[xii]

of the circumstances in which her grandmother Ms. Saudamini Sengupta, of village Jasurkati, thana Gaurnadi, district Barisal, met her tragic end. This was a little after the spate of killings ended, but the bulk of Hindus by this time had decided to move. Saudamini traveled by country boat from her village to the steamer station of Barisal, but had to wait on the wharf for a month – one month – for room to board a steamer. On reaching Khulna she found it even more difficult to board the train going to Calcutta. The people accompanying her pushed her inside through a window. In the process she got seriously hurt in some vital organ in her abdomen, and was in excruciating pain right through the journey. There was, however, nothing to be done. On reaching Calcutta her son found her in tatters, with a bundle in hand, writhing in pain. She died the next morning. On untying her bundle her son found a few dried-up lychees. She was carrying them for her dear grandchildren

The Government of West Bengal, under the stewardship of Dr. B.C.Roy took extraordinary measures seeking to ferry the Hindus safely to West Bengal. Fifteen large steamers, belonging to the Calcutta-based British India Steam Navigation Co. and the Rivers Steam Navigation Co. were pressed into service to pick up stranded and beleaguered Hindus from the riverine parts of East Bengal, especially from Khulna, Barisal, and the southern part of Faridpur districts. These steamers came in through the Sunderban deltas and disgorged their miserable load at the Babu Ghat and Shalimar Ghat, wharves on the two sides of the Hooghly. Special trains were also arranged and special aircraft pressed into service. Very few could afford air travel, yet some of the ones that came in had to be given emergency treatment for injuries sustained by them at the hands of Muslim goons on the way to Dacca airport. A medical centre had to be opened for them at Calcutta airport[xiii]

.

Those who lived close to the border walked down from their villages and crossed on foot. In the process many were looted and left with nothing except the clothes on their backs. Innumerable women were snatched away by roving Muslim gangs of whom a mention has already been made. Uniformed East Pakistani civil defence personnel, known as Ansars, participated in this looting and snatching of women. Malakshmi and Rajlakshmi Pal, two young sisters, were trying to cross the border on foot, and met fate

such as described above. An account of their misfortune, as made in a statement they later made to Ananda Bazar Patrika is as follows : " Just when we were about to cross the border we were accosted by four men who started asking us questions and then forced us to accompany them. They then told us to give everything that we had on us. We gave them Ten Rupees (a very large sum in those days). But they did not let us go. They first forcibly stripped us, squeezed our breasts, touched us between the legs, and finally raped us"[xiv]

.

Dr. B.C.Roy made a statement on April 2, 1950 that in East Bengal non-Muslims were being forced to observe Islamic rites. Hundreds of Hindus were killed, their houses set on fire, their crops destroyed, and of course, their womenfolk taken away. Thousands were made to convert to Islam. Ananda Bazar Patrika of April 3 reported that widespread torching and looting of Hindus had taken place in Khulna. At the Benapol border between Khulna and Calcutta two unmarried girls called Meera and Dheera, and a married woman called Bakulrani Mitra were snatched away while they were on their way to India[xv]

.

As mentioned earlier, trains going towards India, or otherwise carrying a large number of Hindus were a particular target of the roving loot-murder-and-rape gangs, including the Ansars. A train was found to have steamed into a border station in India with a few of the compartments empty, except for a few bloodstained dhotis, saris and broken conchshell bangles that Bengali Hindu married women wear on their wrists[xvi]

. Benapol, the last East Pakistani station between Khulna and Calcutta was a favourite haunt of these gangs.

Some Hindus stuck to their guns, even resisted attacks and lived on. This was however, possible only where the Hindus were numerous, organised, and compactly located, and the ambience among Muslims was also relatively saner. One such place was the port town of Chittagong, now the second city of Bangladesh. Bidhan Bhattacharyya[xvii]

used to live in Nabagraha Lane near Laldighi. Muslim students from the nearby Chittagong Medical School attacked a close friend of his (whose name he cannot now recall) and severed his iliac artery. This friend bled profusely and had to be admitted to the local hospital where he got very indifferent treatment. He succumbed to his injuries in a few days. After the incident the Hindus gathered all the women in one house at the centre of the Hindu area, and gathered brickbats on the terrace and kept vigil through the night. There were, however, no further attacks. Chittagong town happened to be one of the few places where the Hindus could continue to live on with some semblance of dignity right through the Pakistan era.

Most Hindus of East Pakistan were not as fortunate as those of Chittagong. The Hindus of Dacca were some of the worst affected ones, presumably because of their affluence,

which had roused envy in a lot of people. The Muslims among such people saw in the 1950 pogroms a heaven-sent opportunity to divest them of their riches and got busy immediately. As always, trains provided an opportunity to find a large number of Hindus concentrated in a small space, and was preferred by the goons – it saved them the trouble of moving from house to house to kill and loot Hindus. Ramendra Lal Bose[xviii]

, then a young boy of about thirteen, is a survivor of a train massacre just outside Dacca. His account is as follows :

“My father was an Assistant Manager in the Sarail estate of Comilla district[xix]

. We used to live in Brahmanbaria town where I was a student of class VI in Annada High School. After my annual examinations were over I, with my uncle (father’s cousin) Ajit Kumar Bose, went to visit our ancestral village of Chhunka, near Manikganj, in Dacca district. My uncle at the time was a college student. To return to Brahmanbaria from Chhunka we had to travel in a small steamer to Narayangunge, and then take a metre gauge train which would reach us via Dacca, Bhairab Bazar and across the Bhairab bridge spanning the mighty Meghna river. It was probably January or February 1950 – I am not very sure, but it was quite cold, and I had woollens on. Upon reaching Narayangunge we heard that anti-Hindu riots had broken out, and it had become very dangerous for Hindus to travel. We were not particularly scared, but decided to find out and walked to Chasara, near Narayangunge where a cousin of my grandfather used to work for the steamer company. What that gentleman told us made us quite apprehensive. He also beseeched us not to travel by train until things settled down and to stay on with him. But my uncle said he had to go because he would be missing college otherwise, and we set out.

At Narayangunge station we found that some compartments had been specially earmarked for Hindus, and armed guards posted in those compartments. This reassured us. The guards, all Bengali Muslims, were quite friendly, and asked us for money for tea, biri (indigenous cigarettes) and snacks, which we willingly gave them. However, they sprung a surprise on us on reaching Dacca (the old Fulbari station, not the present Kamalapur). They said their duty ended here, and they would not go any further. Brahmanbaria was still another about four hours away.

Between Narayangunge and Dacca the guards had told us to keep the windows shut, and we did so. But off and on we took a peek outside. What we saw was not nice at all. At one place we saw a couple of corpses lying, to which somebody had tried to set fire, and they were lying in a half-charred condition. After this, being told that the guards were taking off filled us with apprehension. One of the passengers, one Biren Babu (I have forgotten his surname, it could be Bose or Guha) was quite vociferous. He went to see the station master and shouted a lot, insisting that guards be deployed in the Hindu compartments of the train. Nothing, however, happened, and the train steamed out of Dacca station without guards.

Metre gauge trains are, as a rule, quite slow, and our train had not picked up much speed

in five minutes after leaving Dacca, when there was an incessant banging on the door. The train also gradually came to a halt. These were wooden bodied coaches, and after some time one of the doors splintered in spite of a number of passengers having put their body weight behind the door. A mob of about a dozen people burst into the compartment.

About half of the mob immediately started stabbing the passengers. They used daggers about four inches long with curved blades, which they thrust into the passengers' necks or stomachs. They did it quite fast, deftly and with cold-blooded deliberation. They must have given some kind of practised jerk while the dagger was inside, because though they simply pushed the daggers and withdrew them, blood spurted from the passengers' wounds, and the floor became slippery in no time. The compartment was filled with the crying of the victims and the cursing of the assailants. I lost sight of my uncle in the melee. These assailants were definitely Daccai-kuttis[xx]

, for they spoke in their typical dialect. They were swearing all the time in the dialect, and looking for Biren Babu, the gentleman who had been clamouring for armed guard at Dacca station.

I was short and thin at the time, and I slipped below one of the benches and pretended to be dead. The floor was awash with blood. Meanwhile I could sense that the rest of the mob had started looting. One of them thrust his hand into my pocket, and finding nothing, kicked me in the behind. I lay still – more immobilised from fear than out of any deliberate intention. At this time there was a sound like a gunshot outside. In less than thirty seconds the assailants left the compartment.

When I was sure that I was not hearing any cursing I crept out from below the bench. I heard my uncle moaning, calling for me. He had a foot-long gash on his side which he was holding tightly with his hands so as not to lose blood. I was totally unhurt. The passengers whose throats had been cut were lying on the floor, by now nearly dead, while those stabbed in the abdomen were clutching their stomachs like my uncle, some of them doubled over. The floor of the compartment was sticky with blood. The train suddenly started going backwards, back towards Dacca, and in a few minutes we were at Dacca station. A large number of young men who seemed to be some kind of volunteers took charge of us. Later I came to know that they were led by Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, later the first Prime Minister of independent Bangladesh.

We were given first aid at Dacca station. Then the seriously injured among us were sent to hospital. The rest of us went to Roop babu's house near Sadarghat. Roop babu was a very rich Hindu gentleman with a huge house on the Buri Ganga river. We stayed there for close to a month. My father then took me back to Brahmanbaria. Later we relocated to Dinajpur, also in East Pakistan, but part of the region known as North Bengal which was not as badly affected as East Bengal. Still later I migrated to Calcutta. I trained as a technician and got a job in Rourkela Steel Plant. My uncle survived his injuries too, migrated to India and became a police officer. He is retired now and so am I".

One of the most gruesome of the mass murders that took place during this period was the Meghna Bridge massacre. It took place on 12th February 1950. The bridge, also known as the Bhairab Bridge and Anderson Bridge, is nearly a kilometre long, and spans the wide Meghna river between Bhairab Bazar Junction on the Dacca-Mymensingh eastern line, and Ashuganj near Brahmanbaria, and carries a single metre gauge rail track across the river. It is an important rail link between Dacca on the one hand, and Chittagong, Comilla and Sylhet on the other. It was a carefully pre-planned massacre. The assailants boarded each train from either side just before it got on to the bridge, and blocked the doors. When the train was completely on the bridge they stopped it – which they could not have done without the connivance of the train crew – and carefully, methodically, began picking out the Hindus, slitting their throats, and throwing the corpses into the river. There was no escape for the Hindus. This was not in open country that they could get down and run for their lives, as some managed to do in the Santahar train massacre (see later in this Chapter). The choice was between getting one's throat cut, and jumping out, to be either hit by a steel girder or plunge into the crocodile-infested waters some twenty metres below. Some must have tried jumping out. An eyewitness account, from Ranjit Kar, a Retired Leading Seaman of the Indian Navy, is given below.

"Widespread and wanton killing of Hindus had started from the beginning of February 1950. We used to live mostly in Dacca town where we had a house, but when the disturbances started we decided to move to our village of Khashowla. At Khashowla we came to know that in a neighbouring village a retired Headmaster Kul Bhushan Chakraborty had been mercilessly hacked with choppers by Muslims, but had miraculously survived (he later moved to Calcutta and became the Headmaster of Ramrik School, Bhowanipore, Calcutta). We therefore decided that it was no longer safe to be even at Khashowla, and we should move to India. At the time I was about twenty. We had some relatives in Agartala in Tripura, India, and my father told me to go and meet them and find out whether we could go and put up with them till we found a way to go to West Bengal. To go to Agartala one had to take a metre gauge passenger train to Akhaura junction. From Akhaura Junction in East Pakistan Agartala in India was just three miles away.

I boarded the train from the nearest railway station, Jinordi. The train was full of Hindus from neighbouring areas of Sripur, Ghorasal, Methigenda, Narsingdi and other places, all fleeing from Muslim persecution. The train reached Bhairab Bazar in late afternoon, around, maybe, three o'clock. As the train was about to steam out of the station we found that a number of Muslims were boarding the train. They were speaking Urdu among themselves, and were, in all probability, Biharis. They were all armed with lethal weapons like hatchets, choppers and long daggers. They blocked the doors of the carriages so that no one could get out. I could sense that our end had come.

I was wearing a pair of Pyjamas and a Fatua, a loose shirt without a collar. I later realised that it was this dress of mine which saved me. Adult Bengali Hindus in those days invariably wore dhotis, and I was taken for a Muslim. I was a thin lad and short of build.

Some burqa-clad women were siting on one of the benches in the compartment. On an inspiration I sat down next to one of them, half expecting her to shoo me away. She did not do so.

The train rolled on to the bridge and stopped. It is a wide river, about a kilometre across, and a stiff breeze was blowing. The Bihari Muslims guarding the doors now got busy. They started to slash and stab and slit throats, and throwing the half-dead Hindus out of the door. The compartment was filled with the howling and shrieking of the Hindus and their cries for mercy. Blood was everywhere. I closed my eyes tightly. The burqa-clad woman sitting next to me - apparently an elderly one - put an arm around my neck. That did it. I was taken to be one of them, and left alone. I was in a daze and hardly realised that the train had started moving again, and the Biharis were gone. The train stopped at Brahmanbaria, and the women asked me where I wanted to go. I must have said Akhaura, because the women set me down at Akhaura, and said 'Khuda Hafiz' (God bless). By that time I had gathered my wits well enough to be able to walk across the border to Agartala."

The killings went on through the day, and maybe into the night too. Shyamalesh Das, then only 12, was travelling with his father, mother and elder brother from Sylhet town to Kishoreganj. His father Jatish Chandra Das had just retired from teaching at Murarichand College, Sylhet, and had got a job in Gurudayal College, Kishoreganj. The train they had taken was to take them to Bhairab Bazar Junction where they would change trains and proceed to Kishoreganj. His father and elder brother Shekharesh were never to reach Kishoreganj. A party of assailants stopped and boarded the train between the stations of Talshahar and Ashuganj east of the bridge. These were Bengali Muslim young men, Ansars. As soon as the train boarded the bridge they caught Jatish and Shekharesh, slit their throats, and threw them out of the train into the river. Shyamalesh was spared presumably because of his youth.

His mother somehow kept her balance and decided to proceed on to Kishoreganj. At Bhairab Bazar station she got down and begged the Railway Police to provide them escorts to Kishoreganj. One inspector relented and provided two constables. Their train to Kishoreganj was again attacked between the stations of Kuliar Char and Jashodal, but the attacks were repulsed by the constables. Eventually they managed to reach Kishoreganj late in the evening.

Prabhas Chandra Lahiri, in his Pak-Bharater Ruprekha (in Bangla, meaning 'An Outline of India and Pakistan') has held two people responsible for planning this massacre, or at least for creating a proper atmosphere for it : Aziz Ahmed, the (Permanent) Chief Secretary of East Pakistan, and Abdul Majid, the District Magistrate of Rajshahi. One Moulvi Abul Kalam is said to have warned off quite a few Hindus beforehand, thus saving them from sure death[xxi]. The conspiracy theory finds greater credence from the fact that in that particular region no other major atrocity had been heard of during the time. Subodh Lal Shome[xxii]

, manager of Assam Bengal Cement Co. of Chhatak, Sylhet, passed through Akhaura Junction the very next day en route Chhatak from Calcutta. Akhaura is just fifty kilometres from the bridge, yet Shome came to know of the massacre only upon reaching Chhatak, through newspapers.

A. J. Kamra, through scanning of contemporary newspapers, had prepared a very large list of brutalities upon Hindus perpetrated at this stage which he has painstakingly recorded in his book. His accounts show that the atrocities took place throughout the length and breadth of East Bengal, though in certain parts, such as Barisal, they were particularly bestial. An abridged version of the more serious among them is reproduced below.

"Among the localities worst affected in Dacca itself were Banagram and Makims Lane. The situation in these areas continues to be tense. Houses have been extensively looted and many completely burnt down, places of worship are said to have been desecrated"[xxiii]

.

"Refugees keep on arriving daily by the thousands in Karimganj (Assam) and relief organisations find it difficult to cope with the situation. They have left everything behind, and even the few clothes and cash they were carrying was snatched away from them by the Ansars and the Muslim mobs. These terror-stricken people are telling harrowing tales of atrocities perpetrated on them during the fateful weeks of February. Even when fleeing for life, they were attacked on the way, detained, searched, assaulted, everything they had was snatched away, their womenfolk and young girls were raped and dishonoured. In some places these unfortunate people have collected in large groups for migrating out of Pakistan, but Ansars and local goondahs are blocking their way"[xxiv]

.

"In Lakutia village, about five miles from Barisal town, the Muslims started looting and burning Hindu houses on February 15. More than a thousand Hindus, including women and children, took shelter in the house of Mr. P.L.Roy, popularly known as Rajbari (literally 'house of the king' - P.L.Roy must have been the local Hindu Zamindar, or a man of considerable means, owning a palatial house). Muslim mobs surrounded the Rajbari on February 15, and again on February 16, but on both occasions they went away on receipt of large sums of money from the inmates. on the evening of February 15 an Assistant Magistrate who visited the Rajbari promised to send a police force the following morning, but this was nothing but a hoax. On the morning of February 17, a Muslim mob of about one thousand stacked straw and tree branches around the Rajbari house and set fire to it. engulfed by the smoke and fire the refugees ran towards their houses. They were then attacked and about fifty of them were killed. Women were abducted from the village, and many were believed to be concealed in nearby villages"[xxv]

.

"On 12th February murders took place between Sarachar and Manikkhali railway stations (in Mymensingh district). Murders were committed on the railway near Sarachar on Sunday February 12, and the killings continued unchecked till Monday. Sarachar station lies between Bhairab bazar (next to Meghna Bridge, the site of the infamous massacre) and Kishoreganj"[xxvi]

.

"The famous Shivaratri mela[xxvii] was to be held in Sitakunda (in Chittagong district) on 15th February. The local authorities were asked to abandon the mela due to the communal activities of the Ansars. The District Judge, who is the ex-officio President of the shrine committee was non-committal, and the Divisional Commissioner assured that necessary police precautions would be provided, and there was no need for stopping the mela. Most of the persons who had left Chittagong for the mela on the evening of 14th February are still missing. All up and down trains to Sitakunda were looted and Hindu passengers killed. An eyewitness counted twenty-five dead bodies lying along the railway line awaiting their final disposal"[xxviii]

.

"About 400 Hindus, mostly Namahsudras (an 'untouchable' caste), men, women and children, left village Jinjira of Maheshkhali police station in the district of Jessore. They reached village Hajarkhal in the Hanskhali police station of District Nadia, West Bengal, on March 19 after crossing the Ichhamati river. The women and children traveled in Donga boats, and the men swam across the river. Three Pakistani armed constables chased the last batch of them, and fired on them while they were swimming, killing one of them"[xxix]

.

"In the month of January 1950 a police officer, along with a few constables and Santal[xxx] peasants were killed in a clash in Nachole in Rajshahi district . . . . Immediately after that armed police and army operations were started there. Village after village was indiscriminately burnt down, peasants were beaten and tortured mercilessly. They created a reign of terror by free looting, and the rape of Santal women went at will. Twenty-four Santal peasants succumbed to death due to police torture inside Nachole police station. Innumerable peasants were killed in Nawabgunge and Rajshahi jails. One of the notable leaders of the movement, Ila Mitra, was brutally tortured in various ways, including rape. The pervasive and multi-dimensional torturing compelled most Santal peasants to emigrate to West Bengal"[xxxi]

.

Hiranmay Banerjee describes the fate of a family which is, at once, a story of unspeakable selfishness and great courage. One day, at daybreak, a policeman, near the

India-East Pakistan border near Bongaon in the 24-Parganas district of India, while returning after having answered a call of nature in the field, came upon a group consisting of a middle-aged woman, two young girls and a small boy. The absence of a male adult in the group was quite unusual. Also, the group was seemingly moving about in the semi-darkness in an aimless manner, and appeared to have lost their way. The policeman could make out upon questioning them that they were Hindus, and had come from the Khulna district of East Pakistan. He brought them to their outpost, and the officers present there questioned them further. What they heard was truly amazing.

The group consisted of a mother and her two minor daughters and a son. They were from a village in Khulna where the father of the children was a schoolteacher. There had been widespread atrocities on Hindus in the region, and all the Hindus in the village were leaving, but this particular Hindu schoolteacher seemed not to have a care in the world, and stayed on. Not even his family had an inkling of his source of assurance till he told them, which was only after the rest of the Hindus had left for India. And it was this : he had made a secret deal with an influential Muslim that he would give his eldest daughter, then 15, in marriage to a son of the Muslim. In return he had been promised protection.

His wife was on the verge of a collapse on hearing this, but not the daughter who had been promised in marriage. She left home with her mother, sister and brother in the dead of the night when his father and the whole village was asleep, caught a train and traveled up to Benapol, the border station. Here they were set upon by an Ansar gang who took them to their camp on the grounds that they had been travelling without an adult male escort. She again managed to escape from the camp with her family at night, but this time they did not take a train. They began to trek westwards judging from the direction where she had seen the sun set, because the girl had been taught in her school geography classes that India lay westwards. There was no path to follow – the group walked on, led by this girl of 15, by dead reckoning. Somewhere along the way they crossed the border into India and surprised the policeman returning from his early morning chore[xxxii]

.

Dr. Brajesh Pakrashi,[xxxiii]

now a U.S.citizen, practising in Cleveland, Ohio, was a student of Presidency College, Calcutta at the time. The students of the college formed a volunteer corps to help the refugees coming in. Dr. Pakrashi describes his experience of one day thus : “We were standing on the already severely overcrowded platform of Sealdah station to receive a train which was reported to be bringing in a large number of refugees. When the train drew near we saw that it was overflowing with humanity, with people hanging on to the doors. Then the train drew to a stop, and the people started getting out. It was an incredibly pathetic site. Many of those getting down were weeping, some were howling. One young woman, who seemed to be barely sane, took a look at us and ripped open her blouse, crying, ‘see what they have done to me!’. We saw some words in Arabic script, burnt into her skin just above her breasts”.

Nripendra Bhattacharyya[xxxiv]

, later a Judge of the Calcutta High Court, was a student of Ashutosh College, Calcutta at the time. They decided to do relief work among the refugees and pitched tents near the Banpur border. Many people were crossing this border on foot. Among them he found the condition of Hindu women to be indescribable. Many of them could barely walk, having been gang-raped, and had to be dragged by their relatives. Many of them bore scratch marks all over their bodies, unmistakable signs of bestial gang-rapes. He also saw a woman in a partially disemboweled state, nearly dead, being carried by her relatives. They made room for some of the more serious cases in their tents and took turns in sleeping in the open. Once when they were camping very close to the border their tent was set upon by the Ansars from across the border, and they had to run inland.

Thus the Hindus, driven out by Islamic persecution, entered West Bengal in huge numbers. The bulk of them came in through the rail borders at Banpur (mainly from Kushtia, Faridpur, Dacca and Mymensingh) and Petrapol (from Jessore, Khulna and Barisal). A large number among those from Rajshahi and Pabna went to Malda and Murshidabad, and those from Dinajpur, Bogra and Rangpur to West Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal. Hindus from Tipperah and Noakhali districts entered Tripura state of India in large numbers, while those from Sylhet went to Tripura as well as in large numbers to Assam, especially Shillong town.

Some figures of Hindus who crossed over from East Pakistan to West Bengal in India and sought state rehabilitation is as follows. The parts in italics are very important. For every Hindu who sought state rehabilitation, there was at least another who rehabilitated himself, or with the help of his relatives or came to join family members who were already in India. The figures also do not include the numbers who went to Tripura and Assam.

Year	Month	Number
1948 [source]	July	8,408
	August	19,109
	September	18,638
	October	9,182
1950 [source]	January	1,150
	February	1,002
	March	75,596
	April	14,960
	May	27,440

In March 1950 some Muslims from rural areas of West Bengal, especially Tehatta and Karimpur areas of Nadia district, and Bagda and Bongaon areas of 24-Parganas district left for East Pakistan.

These are border areas, and a large number among them crossed on foot while others went by train. Later in the same month there was serious rioting in Howrah town requiring deployment of the army, as described by Ashok Mitra, and mentioned earlier in this chapter. This time also saw acrimonious debates between Syama Prasad Mookerjee, then the Union Minister for Industries, and Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister, on the floor of the Parliament, and the coming into being of the Nehru-Liaquat pact.

In regard to this only significant reciprocal movement of Muslims from West to East

Bengal, Hiranmay Banerjee expresses his firm conviction that if allowed to proceed in its natural way, this could have resulted in an exchange of population between the two Bengals, just as had happened in Punjab. This would also have inevitably resulted in exchange of properties, as had been done by the pre-1950 refugees and would also have taken care of the rehabilitation problems of the refugees. Syama Prasad Mookerjee and K.C.Niyogee, the two ministers in the Union Cabinet from West Bengal, had unequivocally advocated this line of action[xxxvii]

. Alas, this was not to be. The result was a horrible shortchanging of the Bengali Hindu – if indeed a human tragedy of such enormous proportions can be termed shortchanging. This was in the fact that the Hindus of East Bengal had to leave, but the Muslims in West Bengal stayed put.

It began this way : while the uprooting of the Hindus from East Bengal was in full force, and the reciprocal movement of Muslims from West Bengal had also started, the Union Minister for Refugee Rehabilitation, Mohan Lal Saxena convened a meeting in the Writers' Buildings at Calcutta on 2nd March, 1950. The people called to the meeting were principally representatives of the state governments of West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Bihar and Orissa. Certain people interested in the East Bengal refugee problem, such as Dr. Meghnad Saha, were also invited. In this meeting Saxena made an astounding proposal which, apparently, was from none other than the Government of India. The proposal, in short, was that the pre-1950 refugees were to be distinguished from the post-1950 refugees. In respect of the former the Government would continue with its rehabilitation measures. In respect of the latter, however, the Government's brief would be Relief, and not Rehabilitation. And why? Because, argued Saxena, once the hostilities subside, the refugees might want to get back home. Also, till it was known how many refugees would arrive, it was not possible to do any planning for their rehabilitation[xxxviii]

.

Lame excuses, weak arguments for an a priori decision already taken. Dr. Meghnad Saha protested vehemently. Only a few days ago, on 23rd February 1950, Nehru and Syama Prasad had argued out this question on the floor of the Parliament. Syama Prasad had spoken in favour of an exchange of population on the Punjab model. In reply Nehru had said that this was completely antagonistic to India's political, economic, social and spiritual principles. But there was also a greater principle related to it. It was a question of breach of trust. Syama Prasad replied that when Pandit Nehru himself had arranged the exchange of population in Punjab he had kept this question of breach of trust in cold storage. At the present moment it would be proper for him to keep the question of breach of trust in cold storage again and face the reality like an experienced politician. But all this had fallen on deaf ears. Nehru had already made up his mind[xxxix]

.

The uprooting of East Bengali Hindus since 1946 had failed to move Pandit Jawaharlal

Nehru, but the reciprocal movements of Muslims from West Bengal in February-March 1950 must have touched a chord in him, for he now rushed to sign the Delhi Pact, better known as the Nehru-Liaquat pact, which he did on 8th April, 1950. Syama Prasad Mookerjee and K.C.Niyogee, the two central ministers in his cabinet from West Bengal, immediately resigned from the Union Cabinet in protest, but even this did not cause Nehru to do any rethinking.

On paper this pact contained a solemn assurance by the Governments of India and Pakistan that thenceforth each country would ensure the security of their religious minorities. The policy of exchange of population followed in the case of the Punjabi minorities two-and-a-half years ago would not be followed in the case of the Bengali minorities. On the other hand, people who had left the land of their birth for fear of religious persecution would be encouraged to go back there ; and those who would go back would be given possession of their properties.

Very pious and full of hope and faith in human goodness, no doubt ; the question is, what did it imply in the political realities of the time ? In short it implied a promise by a state called Pakistan, which (or the ruling party, called the Muslim League, of which) had committed, or allowed to be committed, unspeakable acts of religious persecution upon Hindu minorities like the Noakhali Carnage, the Great Calcutta Killings, the Meghna Bridge, Muladi and Madhabpasha massacres, and countless other big and small atrocities. The question that anyone with a semblance of common sense would ask himself is, why should a state or a party like that suddenly reform itself ? And if they would, why did they not do so earlier?

And because such a person with a semblance of common sense would not have found an answer to such questions, he would have come to the conclusion that such state or such party will not honour their commitments under the pact.

Yet neither the question, nor the answer, or rather the lack of an answer seemed to trouble Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He set about, with all seriousness, to set his governmental machinery in order so as to restore the property of any Muslim who had crossed over to East Pakistan, and now intended to come back to India.

The strange thing is that, it is not as if Nehru had no idea of what the Muslim League was capable of in the matter of persecuting religious minorities. He had himself toured the villages of Noakhali with Gandhi and seen for himself the misdeeds of the League goons. He would definitely have remembered that while he was trying to cajole Jinnah at Bombay in August 1946, to get him to reconsider his rejection of the Cabinet Mission's grouping plan, Suhrawardy at Calcutta was making preparation for 'Direct Action', and the latter could not have been done without the knowledge of Jinnah. As late as in April 1948 Nehru arranged an 'Inter-Dominion Conference' which resulted in a 'Indo-Pakistan agreement for settlement of the problems of the minorities'[xl]

. And all the atrocities of early 1950 took place less than two years from the agreement.

Yet Nehru decided that his pact with Liaquat Ali would take care of the problems of the minorities of East Pakistan! Why and How ?

It is beyond the scope of this book to explore the mind of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, yet a short digression must be made on this subject ; for it was he, more than any other Indian politician, who was responsible for the plight of the refugees from Eastern Bengal. Why did Nehru habitually behave in such an irrational manner, and why did the rest of the nation put up with it?

Before we get down to answer this question, we have to remember that gross mishandling of the East Pakistan refugee problem was only one of the large number of similar acts committed by Nehru. These acts make so little sense that they must all rank as crass political stupidities. Nehru had, in spite of having ruled India for seventeen years, and out of that having enjoyed practically unchallenged power over the nation for no less than fourteen years (1950-64, from Patel's death to his own), failed to address the problems of food deficit, population explosion, governmental corruption and illiteracy ; despite his great predilection for foreign affairs willfully acquiesced in the Chinese annexation of Tibet and, aided by his trusted friend Krishna Menon, turned India into a virtual Soviet satellite, and made enemies of all western nations ; needlessly internationalised the Kashmir dispute ; taxed the nation to its gills, gave birth to a 'Black Economy', and frittered away all that tax money in creating a semi-Stalinist command economy based on state-owned heavy industries – real white elephants – that he fancifully called 'temples of tomorrow' ; and finally foisted a hereditary rule on the country and his party, the latter continuing to this day in the person of his Italian-born granddaughter-in-law.

Even during Patel's lifetime he had committed the incredible folly of calling off the Indian Army in Kashmir in 1948 when they were in hot pursuit of the fleeing Pakistani irregulars, and declaring a cease-fire unilaterally. He is believed to have done this because he believed Lord Mountbatten implicitly, much more than he did his own Generals, and it is on his advice that he did this. There must be very few instances indeed in the history of mankind where a nation, about to taste victory in a war not of its doing, has acted in such an inexplicable manner. Had the army been allowed to chase the irregulars out of the hills of Kashmir on to the plains of Punjab - which they would have done in another forty-eight hours - the Pakistanis would have lost all the advantage of the heights, and probably there would have been no Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and no Kashmir problem today.

Maulana Azad's remarks on the man in the context of his press interview which gave Jinnah an opportunity to retract his acceptance of the Cabinet Mission proposals, to be found in Chapter 3, are quite instructive. Another very astute and knowledgeable person who saw him at close range is the relatively unknown Benoy Mukherjee[xli], Chief Press Adviser and Registrar of Newspapers, Government of India, around 1947 and later Secretary, Press Council of India. In an interview[xlii]

to the Bangla fortnightly Desh, he has described Nehru as a 'Political Somnambulist', a person living in his own dreamland of political make-believe. He re minisces on the Nehru-coined slogan of the 1950s, 'Hindi-Chini bhai bhai' (Indians and Chinese are brothers) which culminated in the Chinese attacking India in 1962. The attack was preceded by frequent border incursions by the Chinese across the McMahon line, a fact that Nehru simply chose to ignore, because it did not fit in with his pre-set notions of Sino-Indian friendship. Mukherjee describes Nehru as imagining 'secularism' (one of the most misused words in India - more on this subject later) to be the panacea for all centrifugal and divisive tendencies. He chose to forget that there was such a thing as pan-Islamism, that Islam called upon all its followers to unite regardless of nationality, that Allahu Akbar was not merely a religious slogan but a political exhortation as well.

Ashok Mitra, ICS and pink, is a lot more charitable. While admitting that he came to appreciate Patel immensely upon observing his performance as the Union Home Minister, and observing that India's internal administration would have been much more firm and focused, he still insists that Patel was a man of limited capabilities. He did not have the quality that Nehru had, of being a helmsman acceptable to all and sundry[xliii]. But in the end he concurs in all that has been said about Nehru by the others. He particularly mentions the defeat of the Congress in a by-election in Calcutta in 1949 at the hands of Sarat Bose. According to Mitra this defeat made Nehru lose his balance completely and he declared that Calcutta and West Bengal were both plagued by factionalism and intrigue, and Dr. B.C.Roy was unequal to the situation. A defeat in a by-election, and that too at the hands of a stalwart like Sarat Bose, according to Mitra, should not have unnerved Nehru so badly, but it did! This also reminded Mitra of the childish state to which he had been reduced upon not being able to control the riots at Delhi, which was taken full advantage of by Mountbatten who acted like the boss after India had won its independence[xliv]

.

Now we can return from Nehru to the pact he made with Liaquat Ali. All that can be said is that the pact was a sad failure, because Pakistan had no intention of honouring the pact. For India it was an act of incredible political naivete. The Santahar train massacre, described later in this chapter, took place after the pact. Elementary police intelligence could have prevented the massacre. On the other hand what was done during the massacre in the name of providing security for Hindus was a diabolical farce, as the story will tell.

But before that it is necessary to recount once again Hiranmay Banerjee’s reflections on the pact. These are important, because Banerjee was a totally non-political person, an able administrator of the ICS, and had first-hand experience of all that happened on this side of the border. And finally, he has never been accused of being, what is known in present-day India as ‘communal’.

According to Banerjee, Nehru himself had doubts as to how far the Hindus who had

come away from East Pakistan to India could be persuaded to return to Pakistan. That is why he declared, almost simultaneously with signing the pact, that those of the East Bengal refugees who intended to stay on in India permanently would be provided Rehabilitation, and not merely Relief as earlier declared by Saxena[xlv]

.

Banerjee has further observed that minorities left on the other side of the border would always feel an affinity towards the country where their religious compatriots are in the majority, as the Hindus left in East Pakistan did towards India. But there was no way in which India could look after their interests, because the East Pakistani Hindus were foreign nationals in a foreign country. Anyone who thought otherwise must have been dreaming. At the most some pressure could have been created, with very limited results. In such circumstances minorities would have always remained insecure (as they do to this day – see Chapter 9). On the other hand, had there been an exchange of population, not only would there have been no insecurity, but the problem of rehabilitation would have also literally solved itself, because the properties left by the Muslims in West Bengal could have been used to rehabilitate the Hindus coming from East Bengal, and vice versa, as was done in Punjab[xlvi]

. On the other hand, the one-sided influx of Hindus into India, and the uncertain policies of the government created insurmountable problems. This is why Syama Prasad had staunchly advocated exchange of population.

The first part of Banerjee's premise appears to be outright dangerous for what today is grandiloquently termed as 'the secular ethos of India', for it would imply that Urdu-speaking Muslims of present-day India feel an affinity towards Pakistan, and the Bangla-speaking ones towards Bangladesh. An argument like that amounts to delivering a broadside on the edifice of secularism in India, or more precisely, on the Left-Nehruvian interpretation of it, and is likely to bring forth allegations of Hindu fundamentalism. Unfortunately for the people who might be tempted to make such allegations, there is nothing in the conduct of Hiranmay Banerjee till the day of his death to suggest that he had anything at all to do with anything remotely connected with Hindu interests. He had been an archetypal ICS officer, totally steering clear of politics all his life. The question therefore arises : whether what he had said was the truth or not? An answer has been attempted in Chapter 11.

Now on to Santahar, the scene of another train massacre, to show how Pakistan respected the Nehru-Liaquat pact. This is again from a eyewitness, Nrisingha Pati Changdar. The following is an account, in his own words spoken in Bangla, of what happened at Santahar and his providential escape.

"My father was a practising lawyer in the subdivisional town of Naogaon, district Rajshahi, at the time of partition. The town was otherwise famous for being the centre of legal cultivation of the intoxicant Ganja, an Indian variant of Marijuana, in Bengal. Like most upper-class Hindus our family had decided to move to India, but we were taking

our time over it, because North Bengal had remained relatively peaceful even during the killings of early 1950, and also because my father's legal practice was thriving. The relation between Hindus and Muslims was also fairly cordial. There was only one dark cloud in this fair sky : a large number of Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims had moved in since 1947, and had taken up residence in the Railway town of Santahar, close to Naogaon. They were said to be very anti-Hindu. There was practically no social interaction between them and the local Bengali Muslims who used to be quite scared of them.

My parents had remained in Pakistan, but I had moved to Nabadwip, district Nadia, West Bengal, in India, and had enrolled myself in the Intermediate College there. In November 1950 I completed my selection test preparatory to the Intermediate examination and went to visit my parents in Naogaon.

Upon reaching Naogaon I began to hear stories that the Bihari Muslims of Santahar were up to some serious mischief. They were openly belligerent, and were going around making dire threats to Hindus, such as they would play the next Holi (the Hindu festival of sprinkling coloured water, celebrated in March every year) with Hindu blood. We used to hear most of these stories from my father's Muhuri (Lawyer's clerk). His name was Arif Mian and he was a local Bengali Muslim. He was very close to my father, so much so that in spite of being Muslim he had become part of our family. Arif Mian told me never to go to Santahar and to stay away from Biharis everywhere. He also strongly advised me not to travel by train to India until things settled down.

My intermediate examinations were meanwhile drawing near, and after some time I decided that I could not stay back any more and had to return to Nabadwip in India. Arif Mian tried to prevail upon my father not to let me go, but my father relented because he took the examination quite seriously. We traveled to Santahar in a horse-drawn carriage known as a tom-tom with Arif Mian. The train that we would be travelling by was Assam Mail, which started from Amingaon in Assam (on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra from Guwahati), and traveled to the Sealdah station of Calcutta through East Pakistan. We found the station platform rather quiet, which was quite a departure from the usual bustle of an important junction station in the subcontinent. It was very early, about six in the morning. Arif put us on the train and waited till the train steamed out. For some reason all the passengers that we saw in the train were Hindus. With us were two brothers Kanti Sekhar Roy and Bhranti Sekhar Roy, and their sister. They were also from Naogaon, and we knew them quite well. There was an armed policeman in the compartment. This was apparently to ensure the safety of the Hindus. We had heard that such guardsmen were being posted in selected trains following the Nehru-Liaquat pact, and the presence of the guard reassured us.

The train stopped right after it left the station limits. This is quite usual, and at first we paid no attention. After a while however one of us looked out and exclaimed. We also looked out and saw a large mob had surrounded the train, and were shouting anti-Hindu

slogans. Quite a few of them had lethal weapons, such as choppers and axes in their hands. From their looks and speech there could be no mistake that they were Bihari Muslims. Suddenly we heard the shout “Bachao, bachao” (Save us, save us).

Craning our necks out we saw a group of about ten or twelve Biharis leave one compartment and enter another. Simultaneously a sari-clad woman streaming blood jumped out of the compartment that the Biharis had just left and fell unconscious beside the track. Immediately a few of the Biharis surrounding the train pounced upon her and hid her from our view. This was only two or three compartments away from ours, and it took me no time to piece together what was happening. The group of ten or twelve were a murder squad, they were entering one compartment after another and knifing the Hindus. Those who tried to escape were being taken care of by the surrounding mob.

All of us begged the guard to open fire at the rioters, but he sat impassively and said that if he fired and hit a single Hindu he would lose his job. No one knew what to make of this. Later I figured that he must have been very scared himself that if he fired the mob would lynch him. Or his rifle was ‘drill-purpose’ and incapable of firing. Or he was under orders not to fire. Probably all. Anyway, he did not open fire.

Without thinking I jumped out of the train. A gap had been created in the surrounding mob a little away from our compartment, and I headed for the gap. Immediately I was chased by a Bihari brandishing a foot-long dagger. While I was running along the train, and he was chasing, another woman jumped out of one of the compartments. From what I could make out while on the run, it was a young girl in a frock – she could not have been more than fourteen. She was bleeding profusely from her flank. She fell almost on top of me, and I swerved and managed to avoid her. When I looked back to see how far my assailant was, I found that he had got busy in stabbing whatever was left of the girl. All this happened in less than a minute.

Meanwhile I had found the gap, and was racing away from the train. A few of the Biharis surrounding the train broke ranks and gave chase. But I had a head start over them. I also knew how to run on the narrow dykes, called aal, separating one man’s paddy-field from another’s, I was seventeen years old and fit, and above all I was running for my life. After a while they gave up the chase. But I was crazed by fear, and kept on running. I was nearing a village, and I could see quite a few lungi-clad men come out. I thought of avoiding them, but I could run no more, and sat down panting.

The lungi-clad men approached me, and I sat there, waiting for my fate to overtake me. Then I heard them addressing me in the familiar Rajshahi dialect. They took me to their homes and gave me some food and water. They were local Bengali Muslims, and they had seen the train stop in the distance and the Biharis gathered around it, and guessed that the latter were up to no good. I stayed the night with them. Next day I reached Naogaon, bypassing Santahar. I had been given up for dead by my parents.

Kanti Sekhar Roy, my co-passenger from Naogaon had tried to save his sister from being stabbed, and in the process both had been stabbed murderously. His sister died right

there, but Kanti survived, and was taken to Naogaon hospital where facilities were very primitive. His parents tried very hard to take him for treatment to Calcutta, but the local Pakistani administration did not permit it for fear of provoking a riot in Calcutta, and forced him to stay on at Naogaon hospital where he died from sepsis"[xlvii]

.

The Nehru-Liaquat pact provided absolute physical security to Muslims in West Bengal. This security was later reinforced by the political strength of the Muslim minority by their tendency to vote en bloc, and the secularist aberrations in Indian politics -- more on this subject later. It was also meant to reassure the Hindus of their safety in East Pakistan, and instill a sense of security in them. Instead, it made them twice as much insecure, because they now knew that Nehru's government, just to prove that his pact was a success, would flatly deny all allegations of atrocities upon them and pretend that all was well with the Hindus of East Pakistan. At the most, when things got a little hot, they would 'take up the matter with the Government of Pakistan' (as they say in Indian officialese). What good that would do no one knew better than the East Pakistani Hindus.

Thus, after 1950 it was a continuous downhill journey for the East Pakistani Hindu. Until 1950 there was some sort of hoping against hope in the Hindu mind that eventually the Hindu minority in East Pakistan would receive some justice from the Pakistani state, and it might be a good idea to grit one's teeth, and hang on to one's property till then. Pressure from India, and apprehension of anti-Muslim violence in India could have brought about such a state of affairs. The Nehru-Liaquat pact also did away with all hopes of the Indian Government interceding on behalf of the Hindus.

Also, by this time the last hope of some political sense dawning on the Indian state was lost with the death of Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel on December 15, 1950. Benoy Mukherjee, Press Adviser to the Government of India referred to earlier, recalls a conversation between Patel and Dr. Malik, the Pakistani Minister for Minorities. This was in the context of an inspection of the riot-affected areas on the two sides of the border as a sequel to the Nehru-Liaquat pact carried out by two ministers - C.C. Biswas of India and Dr. Malik of Pakistan. Mukherjee and K.K.Sen (ICS) of India, and Agha Hilaly (later Pakistani High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and the United States) and Mahmud Hasan of Pakistan were associated with the ministers in their capacity as permanent civil servants. Dr. Malik met Patel after the tour and gave a glowing description of how happy the Hindus were in Pakistan. Patel in reply quietly took out an intelligence report which said that even in the previous week about a hundred Hindus had left East Pakistan. He then addressed Dr. Malik in a polite but very firm tone and said : Mr. Minister, tell your Prime Minister that this pact will not last very long unless you stop ousting Hindus. Malik, taken totally unawares, went pale in the face[xlviii]

.

It was about Patel that Maulana Azad had remarked : "My second mistake was that (the first one being his stepping down from the Presidency of the Congress) . . . . I did not

support Sardar Patel. We differed on many issues, but I am convinced that if he had succeeded me as Congress President he would have seen that the Cabinet Mission plan was successfully implemented. He would have never committed the mistake of Jawaharlal which gave Mr. Jinnah the opportunity of sabotaging the plan"[xlix]

. If the Maulana had not committed this horrible mistake. Sardar Patel would have been the Congress President, perhaps there would have been no partition, or even if there was perhaps he would have become the Prime Minister of divided India, and the fate of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal would have been quite different.

Patel was called the Iron Man of India. Some have called him anti-Muslim. Benoy Mukherjee, who had seen him continuously from very close quarters, refuses to comment on this aspect but observes that he was a no-nonsense man, one who never hesitated to call a spade a spade. According to Mukherjee he was neither a capitalist, nor a socialist, neither a fundamentalist nor a secularist. He was, above all, a realist[l]

.

[i]

Kamal-lata, (a novel in Bangla) by Rajlakshmi Debi in the backdrop of the war and partition years, set in Mymensingh town.

[ii]

So named, because it was constituted out of that number of Parganas. A Pargana is the tract of land administered by a Zamindar. The district has now been bifurcated into two parts, North and South.

[iii]

Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid. p. 67

[iv]

Dui Doshoker Sriti (Memories of two decades) by Abdul Mohaimen, quoted in ibid. p. 68

[v]

'The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms, by A.J.Kamra, Voice of India, Delhi, 1st Ed., 2000

[vi]

ibid. p. 59-60

[vii]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid., part III, p.120-122

[viii]

Letter of resignation of Jogendra Nath Mandal, dated October 8, 1950, reproduced in appendix.

[ix]

The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms, ibid. p. 57

[x]

Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid. p. 75-76

[xi]

The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms, ibid. p. 63

[xii]

Deshbhag, Deshtyag ibid. p. 76

[xiii] Udbastu, ibid. p. 79, 83

[xiv] ibid. April 11, 1950

[xv] Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid. p. 66

[xvi] Ananda Bazar Patrika, April 7, 1950 ; Udbastu, ibid., p. 89

[xvii]

Interviewed February 21, 2000

[xviii]

Interviewed February 26, 2000

[xix]

The district was known as Tipperah in British India, and has subsequently broken up into a number of smaller districts in present-day Bangladesh. Sarail is now in Brahmanbaria district. Incidentally, this author's grandfather was also a Naib (junior manager) of Sarail estate.

[xx] Daccai-kuttis are drivers of horse-drawn carriages in Dacca, and are a part of the folklore of Dacca city. They must have come en masse at some place in North India centuries ago, for the dialect that they spoke was a typical mixture of Urdu and Bangla, with a lot of chh-sound and swear words. All of them Muslim, and practically all illiterate, they are credited with an acerbic wit and a fantastic sense of humour – in saner times , of course.

[xxi] Quoted in Deshbhag, Deshtyag, ibid. p. 68

[xxii] Interviewed ibid.

[xxiii]

The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms, ibid. p. 60-61

[xxiv]

ibid. p. 61

[xxv]

ibid. p. 62

[xxvi]

ibid. p. 64

[xxvii]

Shivaratri is literally the 'night of Lord Shiva', the night when Hindu married women traditionally observe a fast and pray for the good of their husbands. A mela is a village fair.

[xxviii]

The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms, ibid. p. 67

[xxix]

ibid. p. 73

[xxx]

A generic term used to denote certain Australoid peoples of Eastern India such as Oraon, Munda etc., said to be among the earliest inhabitants of the region. The term is not much used nowadays and these peoples are usually referred to as Jharkhandi or Chhota-Nagpuria, because they are the most numerous in the Chhota-nagpur region in the southern part of the Indian state of Bihar, but are found also in parts of Bengal and Northern Orissa. They are not Hindus in the strict sense, but they are not Muslims either, and that was enough reason for the Pakistani police to do to them what they did.

[xxxi] The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms, ibid. p. 73, quoting a book called 'Religion and Politics in Bangladesh and West Bengal, a study of communal relations', by Sukumar Biswas and Hiroshi Sato, Tokyo 1993, publisher not mentioned. The 'movement' referred to is the Tebhaga (literally 'three parts') movement launched by the Communist Party, demanding two-thirds of the produce of land for the peasant, leaving only one-third for the landlord. Ila Mitra later emigrated to India and became an important functionary of the Communist Party of India, and was lauded by fellow Communist Bengali Muslim poet Golam Quddus as 'Stalin-Nandini' (daughter of Stalin), presumably before the 20th Congress of the CPSU. She is part of the legend of Bengali Communists in which the role of her Muslim tormentors is carefully whitewashed.

[xxxii] Udbastu, ibid. p. 90

[xxxiii]

Interviewed November 5, 2000

[xxxiv]

Interviewed June 21, 2001

[xxxv]

ibid. p. 105

[xxxvi] ibid. p. 92-93

[xxxvii] ibid. p. 77

[xxxviii]

ibid. p. 59-60

[xxxix] ibid. p. 62 ; The Marginal Men, ibid. p. 31

[xl] The Marginal Men, ibid. p. 16-18

[xli]

Benoy Mukherjee (b. 1909) is in fact quite well-known in contemporary Bangla literature by his pseudonym Jajabor (meaning Nomad, in Bangla), and is celebrated as the author of the pathbreaking novel Drishtipat (A Look) describing pre-independence New Delhi society, and Jhelum Nodir Tirey (Beside the River Jhelum), a journalistic piece describing the Kashmir war of 1948 between India and Pakistani irregulars, and the events that had led to it. As Press adviser he had access to information relating to all the goings-on in official circles during the tumultuous years immediately preceding and following independence of the country. As such all his observations are authentic and very valuable.

[xlii]

Desh, (Bangla fortnightly, Calcutta) April 24, 1993 pp. 51-66. Interview of Benoy Mukherjee by Niladri Chaki.

[xliii]

Tin Kuri Dosh, ibid., p. 118

[xliv]

ibid., p. 100-102

[xlv] Udbastu, ibid. p. 78

[xlvi] ibid. p. 71

[xlvii]

Interviewed 1st February 2000

[xlviii]

Interview of Benoy Mukherjee, ibid. p. 57

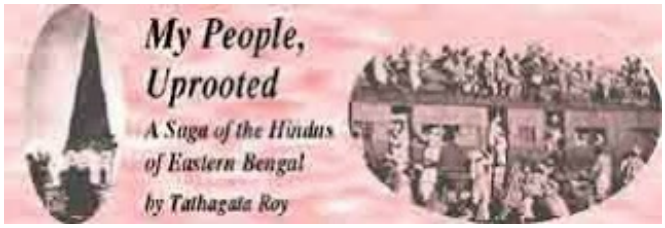
[xlix]

India Wins Freedom, ibid. p. 162

[l] Interview of Benoy Mukherjee, ibid. p. 57

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-7-steady-ungentle-squeeze-1950.html



Chapter 7

THE STEADY, UNGENTLE SQUEEZE, 1950-1971

The post-1950, post-Nehru-Liaquat pact, post-Patel period was a time of a gradual squeeze-out for the Hindus. By this time those of the middle class, upper-caste Hindus who had not left earlier realised that sooner or later they would have to leave. The Muslims also realised it, and further realised that their co-religionists would be quite safe in West Bengal, and there was no reason why they should leave. The result was that the exchange of property mechanism, which was working well, though on terms somewhat inequitable to Hindus, now stopped totally. The Muslims also stopped buying Hindu property - none would be so foolish as to buy property that would be his for free anyway. When such property was going for a pittance there were some who bought such property to have a proper title.

The Pakistani government, from the very beginning, had begun a legislative process to dispossess and disentitle the Hindus of their property. This has been continued in its Bangladeshi incarnation too. A very exhaustive description and analysis of this process has been made by Dr. Dilip De in a contemporary book Matir Bhetore Kalo Haat : Shotru (Orpito) Sompotti Ain o Bangladesher Sonkhaloghu, and the serious reader of the legal aspect is referred to that book.. Dr. De (pronounced Day, with a soft d) is a Hindu, a paediatrician by profession, who trained in Ireland, and worked for quite some time in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East before settling down to practise in his home town of Chittagong, Bangladesh. The book is bilingual - Bangla and English, and is also named "A Dark Hand Inside My Land : The Enemy (Vested) Property Act, and the Minorities in Bangladesh"[1]

. There is a lot of melodrama in the book, especially in the sketches which are visualised by the author himself, and a lot of emotion too, and one may be tempted not to take it seriously. This mistake should not be made. This is a serious work, very well researched, very painstakingly written, and a very bold book at that.

Some of the important legislations enacted by the East Pakistani Government and discussed by Dr. De in his book are enumerated below with short comments against each where applicable[2]

.

The East Bengal (Emergency) Requisition of Property Act 1948 (Act XIII)

The East Bengal Evacuees (Administration of Property) Act 1949 (Act VIII)

The East Bengal Evacuees (Restoration of Possession) Act 1951 (Act XXIII) : This was enacted as a sequel to the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, and sought to restore property to Hindus who had left for India and were now returning to East Pakistan. As has been observed in the foregoing, this act was hardly, if ever, put to use.

The East Bengal Evacuees (Administration of Immovable Property) Act 1951 (Act XXIV) : This act was also enacted as a sequel to the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, but operated as an exception to Act XXIII. The act laid down that the provisions of restoration would not apply to any immovable property belonging to Hindus who had left for India on account of communal disturbances if, after they had left, the property had been acquired or requisitioned by the government for a public purpose. No compensation was ever paid to the Hindus whose property was thus acquired or requisitioned.

The East Pakistan Disturbed Persons (Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1964 (Ordinance I) :. In January 1964 a hair, said to be of Prophet Mohammed, and kept as a holy relic in the Hazratbal Mosque at Srinagar, Kashmir, India was said to be missing. Kashmir is at least a thousand miles away from East Bengal, but anti-Hindu rioting immediately broke out in the latter. As usual, Hindu men were murdered, Hindu houses were torched, Hindu temples were ransacked and of course, Hindu women were raped. Taking advantage of the general panic among the Hindus, and their flight to India, a large number of Hindu-owned properties were occupied by their Muslim neighbours. The ordinance was promulgated ostensibly with a view to restore possession to such Hindus. The holy relic was eventually found but, because of unofficial pressure, very few Hindus could come forward to take advantage of the law to regain their possession.

This is not all. The law had a mischievous provision that no Hindu could sell his land or property without the permission of the Government. Again, the ostensible purpose of this was to ensure that no Muslim could take advantage of the helpless state of a Hindu and buy off his property for a pittance, but the result of it in real life was quite different, and it cannot be said that that result was unintended. This law took away, in so many words, the Hindu's right to sell his own property. So what actually happened was that the hapless Hindu, who had decided to emigrate to India anyway, was deprived of whatever little money he could have got in exchange for his property. There were a small number of Muslims who, out of their innate sense of justice, were prepared to pay what they thought would be a fair price for Hindu property. The Ordinance ruled this out too.

In the result, the property of the fleeing Hindus was taken over by the Government by exercise of another provision in the same law which laid down as follows :

"When the person found to be in possession of any such property before the civil disturbance of January 1964 is not traceable, the District Judge may order such property

to be to be put under the management of the Evacuee Property Management Board under Section 3 of The East Bengal Evacuees (Administration of Immovable Property) Act 1951".

It is not difficult to guess that the majority of Hindus were not traceable ; and, as they say, the law took its own course.

The Defence of Pakistan Ordinance 1965 (Ordinance XXIII)
The Enemy Property (Custody and Registration) Order 1965
The Enemy Property General Notification no. 1199 of 1965
The East Pakistan Enemy Property (Lands and Buildings) Administration and Disposal Order 1966
The East Pakistan Enemy Property (Continuance of Emergency Provisions) Ordinance 1969 (Ordinance I) :

These were the laws and orders in which the last vestiges of looking upon Hindus as equal citizens of Pakistan (as Jinnah had promised them in his 14th August 1947 speech at Karachi) were finally dropped by the Pakistani state. Such equality had never existed de facto - now it ceased to exist even de jure. As can be seen from their names, none of these were legislations in the ordinary course, taken through the steps of a notification and a parliamentary debate, even among President Ayub Khan's pet parliamentarians called 'Basic Democrats'. On the other hand these were purely executive orders or fiats[3]

.

The background of these laws lay in the first all-out war between India and Pakistan. The 1948 war in Kashmir was never owned up by Pakistan who maintained that it was 'Kashmiri freedom fighters' fighting the Indian Army. In mid-1965 U.S.made Patton tanks with Pakistani markings were found to be moving in Indian Territory in the 'Rann of Cutch'[4]

area adjoining the border between Gujarat in India and Sind in West Pakistan. Diplomatic wranglings followed, and gave way to full-scale fighting from September 6, 1965. The scene shifted from the Rann of Cutch to the deserts of Rajasthan and the plains of Punjab. The Indian Army advanced to the Ichhogil canal, a few kilometres short of Lahore and held the great city of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in its sights. Eventually the war ended at the mediation of the Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin who persuaded the Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and the Pakistani President Ayub Khan to come to Tashkent and sign an accord. Lal Bahadur Shastri died the very night from a heart attack after the accord was signed.

By an unwritten, unspoken agreement between India and Pakistan the fighting was not taken to the Eastern frontier, but the East Pakistani Hindus, caught perpetually in a cleft stick, were not spared. The draconian laws and orders named above (hereafter called the Enemy Property laws) sought to finish them off economically. In respect of the East

Pakistani Hindus who had fled to India earlier, these laws also sought to extinguish the slightest hope that they might be nurturing in their minds of returning to the land of their birth. To apprehend the enormity of the injustice done to the Hindus, consider the following few provisions of the laws, paraphrased in plain English :

1. Any East Pakistani Hindu who had moved to India before 6th September 1965 was an 'Enemy'.
2. Any property in which an Enemy had any share at all was to be classed as 'Enemy Property'
3. All Enemy Property would automatically vest in a Custodian appointed by the Government, and no transaction in respect of any such property would be permitted.
4. In case of any property jointly owned by an Enemy and a Pakistani citizen, the property would have to be partitioned and the part owned by the Enemy vested in the Custodian, BUT
5. This rule would not apply to property jointly owned by a Indian Muslim and a Pakistani citizen. Generally no property of any Indian Muslim was to be classed as Enemy property[5]

The last provision is extremely interesting. It meant clearly that even during a stage of hostility between the two countries Pakistan did not consider Indian Muslims to be their enemies. A necessary corollary of this, even otherwise obvious, must be that they did not trust their own Hindus to be loyal citizens. With such a provision staring them in the face the Hindus of East Pakistan finally lost their de jure equality before law. They could not now legally seek the protection of the state if and when set upon by Pakistani, or even Indian, Muslim goons, land grabbers or rapists. The situation bears an uncanny resemblance to an essential provision of the German state as envisioned by Adolf Hitler, and recorded in his Mein Kampf (English translation) : " . . . . No Jew, therefore, can be a member of the state".

The legal consequence of this statute, being express bias of the state against a sizeable group of its natural-born citizens who had done the state no harm, and whose only fault was that they professed a religion different from that of the state and refused to convert to the state religion, must surely be classed as a Human Rights violation of the grossest kind. This conclusion is further reinforced by the subsequent conduct of the Pakistani state. In fact the hostilities which brought on such draconian legislation were largely over before the month of September 1965 was out. Yet the juggernaut of the legislative machinery of the Jihad-crazed Pakistani state rolled on, as if the state had finally come to realise what a security risk the Hindus are, and was taking the necessary, long-overdue steps in the right direction. All the laws and orders after the Defence of Pakistan Ordinance of 6th September 1965 were promulgated or issued after the cessation of hostilities. Not only so, but when some of the laws and orders had lapsed or were about to lapse, they were given a fresh lease of life by the 1969 Ordinance.

While a detailed discussion on the various features and implications of the laws would be out of scope here, a short reference to some of the particularly unjust features would be

in order. There are two schools of inheritance law among the Hindus. Of these the Hindus of Bengal were traditionally governed by the school called Dayabhaga, while those of other parts of India are generally governed by the other school called Mitakshara. Under Dayabhaga Law ancestral property passes on to the eldest available generation, and during the lifetime of that generation the subsequent generation has no right, title or interest. For example, upon a man's death ancestral property inherited by him will pass on to his sons, and during the lifetime of such a son his sons (grandsons of the deceased) will have no right, title or interest. Mitakshara inheritance is a lot more complicated, in which a child, upon his being conceived (not even born), becomes a co-owner of ancestral property together with his brothers, cousins, father, uncles, grandfather and grand-uncles.

This being the position, when the owner of a particular property is a Hindu who is also resident on the property, there should arise no question of the same being declared Enemy property simply because his son resides in India. Yet this is what the law sought and managed to do. Further there was the repulsive provision that this would not apply to either Indian or Pakistani Muslims.

This is not all. It was a custom with wealthy Hindus of Bengal to construct temples on a part of their land, and make the deity in the temple the owner of that part of the land. In India a Hindu deity, legally speaking, is considered 'an artificial person who can sue and can be sued' - of course through a natural person, who is designated as the 'next friend'. Such deities can therefore possess property, including land. In Bengal such land, together with the structures standing thereon, is called Debuttar land, and the next friend placed in charge is called the Shebait. The post of Shebait was hereditary, and this was a recognised method of ensuring, among other things, that at least one brother in the family resided on the land even if all the rest had emigrated. There was no question of such Debuttar land being declared Enemy property even under the provision of the draconian laws, and yet that is another thing that the East Pakistani rulers forcibly did. As a result huge tracts of Debuttar land covering temples, cultivable land kept apart for supporting the Shebait, land for Shmashan (Cremation Ground), etc. were illegally vested in the state, and often obliquely passed into private Muslim hands[6].

The Awami League government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed hinted in the late 1990s that these legislations would be repealed, and introduced a bill for the purpose. Jatiya Sangsad, the Bangladesh Parliament, on 8th April 2001 unanimously adopted "The Vested Property Return Bill 2001".

However, according to informed persons, the Act is not likely to be as effective as it may seem to be at first sight, nor perhaps it is intended to be so. In particular, this Act will be of no help to Hindus who had to flee to India to escape from the Pakistani mass murderers. A letter to the editor of the daily 'The Statesman' of Calcutta, from Bimal Pramanik, published in that daily on May 28, 2001 is very illuminating. This letter was written in response to a post-editorial article by Parmanand, Hony. Director, South Asian Studies Foundation, and published in the same daily on May 9, 2001. An excerpt from

the letter is given below.

"According to clause (Section) 2(e) of the Vested Property Return Bill 2001, the term 'owner' has been defined as a 'person whose property has been enlisted as vested property or his successor or successor-in-interest provided the owner or his successor or successor-in-interest is a citizen of Bangladesh without any break and a permanent resident of Bangladesh'.

In terms of Clause (Section) 10(8)(d)(i) of the act (bill), whether the person is a citizen of Bangladesh will be decided In accordance with the Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions) Order 1972 (P.O. no. 149 of 1972). In terms of clause 2 of this order of 1972 a person will be considered a citizen of Bangladesh 'if he/she or his/her father or grandfather was born in Bangladesh and if he/she stayed in Bangladesh uninterruptedly upto 25th March 1971 or thereafter, or if he/she styed in Bangladesh on 25th March 1971 and thereafter uninterruptedly as a permanent resident of Bangladesh'.

If these provisions are scrutinised carefully we find that the persons whose properties were listed as enemy properties/vested properties will not be entitled to get back their properties if they or their successor or successor-in-interest had left Bangladesh before 25th March 1971 and returned to Bangladesh after it became a sovereign country. As such the properties which were wrongfully or illegally vested in the government will be returned to their legal owners if and only if they were 'citizens' of Bangladesh. Moreover the citizens who had been victims of enemy property/vested property act and who were compelled to leave the country in between September 1965 and April 2001 will not be covered by this bill when promulgated as an act".

Mr. Pramanik, the writer of this letter, is with the Centre for Studies in Indo-Bangladesh Relations, Calcutta, and is a knowledgeable person on the subject. The letter raises serious doubts about the effectiveness of the new legislation, and leads one to suspect that it is merely cosmetic.. One thing is, however, clear as crystal. None of the Hindus who left East Pakistan between 1950 and 1971 because of the bestialities will get anything back at all.

Legislation apart, what was life like for the Hindu in the years for which the country was known as East Pakistan ? Generally the eventless life of second-class citizens, punctuated occasionally by anti-Hindu pogroms.

Sukomal Talukdar, of Bhabanipur, Hathazari, Chittagong, and later of Chittagong town, now a U.S.citizen, recalls instances of abject discrimination against Hindus that he faced as a student in school and college in East Pakistan. Some of his fellow Muslim students, probably under the instigations of teachers, tried to talk him into converting to Islam. Although students of both communities wrote their examination papers in Bangla, it was easily possible, from the semantics used, to determine whether a particular paper came from a Hindu or a Muslim student. Words like Jol (water), or familial relationships like Mashi (mother’s sister) or Pishi (father’s sister) were dead giveaways, because Muslims invariably used the words ‘Pani’, ‘Khala’ and ‘Fufa’ in these cases. Once a Muslim teacher

or examiner was sure that the paper had been written by a Hindu, they would find some excuse not to give good marks on that paper. In Notre Dame College, Dacca, a prestigious institution run by Catholic priests, he remembers how, in a Chemistry practical class, a fellow Muslim student had been given a much higher grade for almost identical work done by both of them.

Subodh Lal Shome lived in Chhatak, near Sylhet town, and worked as the Manager of the Assam Bengal Cement Company. The company was an Indian-owned one, with its headquarters at Calcutta, having been founded by Sardar Inder Singh, father of Sardar Baldev Singh, the first and legendary Defence Minister of India, and the butt of many jokes. Shome remained an Indian citizen, and continued to shuttle between Chhatak and Calcutta where he had kept his family. This is what he had to say about a Hindu's life in East Pakistan[7]

.

"After the 1950 riots most Hindus went away to India. Those who stayed back because of economic reasons or because they could not bear to give up their property made their peace with the situation and came to terms with the fact that henceforth they would have to live amidst insecurity and humiliation. Even these people had mostly sent their womenfolk away to India.

The rich cultural life that they had once upon a time was now completely a thing of the past. Any sort of ostentation, especially beating of the Dhak (an indigenous drum) during Hindu festivals, such as Rath, Durga Puja or Janmashtami were ruled out for fear of inviting Muslim wrath. Most of them took to wearing Lungis instead of Dhotis so that they could not be marked as Hindus. Still it must be said that life in Sylhet district was relatively peaceful for the Hindus compared to what it was in other districts of East Bengal. Personally for me, because the industry I ran was vital for the economy of East Pakistan, the authorities treated me with kid gloves. The position of most Hindus was however very different. The tragic case of Bijoy Madhab Gupta comes to my mind.

On October 7, 1958 there was a coup in Pakistan in which General Ayub Khan, the head of Pakistani land forces, usurped power and proclaimed Martial Law throughout Pakistan. All civil liberties were suspended, and Courts of Justice were replaced by courts presided over by military officers. These courts used to dispense summary justice in the manner of Courts-Martial, without any regard to principles such as presumption of innocence of the accused or benefit of doubt. The presiding officers of these courts were mostly West Pakistani army officers, and generally very anti-Hindu. Some people saw in this system of justice an opportunity to get even with the Hindus and to grab their property.

Bijoy Madhab Gupta was a very wealthy Hindu of Sylhet town who had chosen to stay on there. He owned a number of tea estates, and the Sylhet Electricity Supply Company. He was a person of very aristocratic lineage and bearing, and was looked up to in various

ways, especially by the Hindus of Sylhet. Naturally he also gave rise to a lot of envy, especially among Muslims who thought that no Hindu had a right to be so prosperous in Pakistan.

After the proclamation of Martial Law, a Muslim Mukhtar of Sylhet complained to the Martial Law Authorities that Gupta was an Indian agent, and the Sylhet Electricity Supply Company was charging arbitrary rates for power, thus robbing the public, while at the same time cheating the government of taxes. Gupta was immediately arrested together with three of his officers, all Hindus, and put on summary trial. The very next day the verdict was pronounced. Gupta was fined fourteen thousand Rupees and sentenced to fourteen years of imprisonment. Not only so, but he was to be taken to jail in handcuffs, with a rope tied round his waist and made to walk through the town in full view of the townspeople. Motin Choudhury, a Muslim tea estate owner, and a friend of Gupta could prevail upon the Martial law administrator to save Gupta this ultimate humiliation. After this incident a large number of Hindus took fright and left for India."

Anil Kumar Sen[8]

, a Consulting Engineer of Calcutta, had studied in Khulna and served in the Military Engineer Services during the Second World War. After the war he settled down in Calcutta, but his parents remained in Khulna town where they had a house of their own. In 1956 they wrote to Sen that it was no longer possible for them to continue to live at Khulna, and Sen must take them to India.

Sen travelled to Khulna and found them in a totally distraught condition. They kept on begging him not to spend a day longer than necessary in Pakistan, but to take them to India immediately. At this time there was a small but steady stream of Hindus leaving Pakistan, and all of them were badly harassed by the Ansars at the border at Benapol. Sen had been in the same class in school with Abdus Sabur Khan, a very influential East Pakistani politician from Khulna. He approached Khan with a request for safe passage for his parents and himself. Khan obliged him and arranged for a jeep in which the entire family could cross the border without incident.

Sen's parents were witnesses to a new technique of planting insecurity among Hindus. Some Mollahs would go inside a Hindu area, pick out a derelict building (there were many such buildings abandoned by Hindus fleeing to India) and declare that it was the site of an ancient Mosque that the Hindu zamindars had destroyed. They would then start offering Namaz there and holding congregations. Next they would complain that the Hindu women's ringing of bells and blowing of conchshells was interfering with their Namaz, and it better stop, or else. In those days every Hindu household would have an image of Lokkhi (Lakshmi), the Goddess of wealth, and it was de rigeur for every Bengali Hindu housewife to do a ritual worship of the Goddess every nightfall to the accompaniment of clanging of a bell, blowing a conchshell and burning incense. Interfering with this very essential activity made them very nervous and hastened their exit.

While he was in the process of winding up their establishment at Khulna, Sen was witness to a very heartrending scene. One morning he saw a very young girl, no more than thirteen or fourteen, moving about aimlessly along the lane, clutching an infant to her bosom. From her looks she seemed to be from a well-to-do family. As soon as they called after her she fell unconscious. They brought her in and gave her some hot milk. When the girl came to she would not open her mouth till she was sure that the people surrounding her were Hindus. Then the words came tumbling out of her. She and the infant, her brother, were the only survivors of a Hindu family of ten. All others had been murdered by their Muslim neighbours. She somehow managed to escape, and travelled by night, hiding during the day in ponds full of water hyacinth, just keeping her and her brother's nose above the water. She had been walking like this for the last two nights and had had no food, and only dirty pond water to drink. The Sen family adopted her, and she and her brother came to India with the Sens.

Although it is out of the scope of this book to go into the plight of the East Bengali Hindus who came over to West Bengal, it has to be said that their plight was worse than miserable. The post-1950 refugees could not get any property in West Bengal in exchange, and many of them had come with only the clothes on their backs. Those among them who had none to fall back upon had to live like subhumans in Refugee colonies and camps, surviving on cash doles and petty trade. It is they who became the denizens of the forecourt of Sealdah station that this author had seen and mentioned in the preface. The worst sufferers were the widows and unaccompanied women. A traditional Hindu widow is, almost by definition, a weak helpless creature who is supposed to be looked after by her parents (so long as they are alive) and by her children. Those who have neither parents nor children to take care of them is either supported by relatives from sheer pity, or left to the elements of nature. Some among the older among them went to Varanasi (Banaras) or Vrindavan - they have been described in Chapter 4. Some among the younger took to prostitution, some to begging. Women who were financially comfortable in East Bengal, who had never imagined they would have to address strangers, were forced almost overnight to peddle petty items like plastic combs and pickles and joss-sticks from house to house, or to take up work as domestic help.

The melancholy streak that generally pervades Bengali psyche and literature found full expression at the sight of these refugees, and innumerable short stories, novels and quite a few films were written or made on them, among them such famous tear-jerkers such as Ritwick Ghatak's Meghe Dhaka Tara (Star hidden behind a cloud). All such literature or films however carefully avoided any reference to the root cause of their malady, what had caused them their present state : Islamic persecution of minority Hindus in East Bengal.

For the most objective treatment of the post-exodus plight of East Bengali refugees in India the reader is referred to Prafulla Kumar Chakravarti's 'The Marginal Men', mentioned in the bibliography.

Meanwhile the Hindus who stayed back carried on with their desultory existence, perpetually in fear of yet another pogrom. They did not have to wait long. A major pogrom took place in 1964 upon the report of the loss of Prophet Mohammed's hair from the Hazratbal mosque in Kashmir, India, of which a mention has already been made. East Bengali Hindus did not have the remotest connection with the incident - Kashmir is thousands of kilometres away from East Bengal. But the loss of the relic was a serious matter, Jihad had to be waged, and murderous religious fervour had to be vented on someone, and what better object can there be than the helpless East Bengali Hindus? So there was the usual wave of torching, murders, and of course, rape of Hindu women. The Governor of East Pakistan at the time was Abdul Monem Khan, a known Hindu-baiter, and he added his bit both by apathy and by active, if silent, encouragement to butchery.

According to Asit Roy[9]

, the entire lot of Hindus in his ancestral village of Mainam, near Naogaon in Rajshahi were wiped out. Only two little girls, his cousins, who had wrapped themselves in cloth and hid below a cot survived.

Sukomal Talukdar was a student of East Pakistan University of Engineering and Technology (EPUET), earlier known as the Ahsanullah Engineering College. After the Hazratbal incident harrassment of Hindu students started in right earnest at the university. The Hindu students' hostel used to be pelted with stones every night. Students owing alliegence to the Jamaat-e-Islami openly used to call the Hindus Indian spies. One of his fellow students, Subhas Roy from Narayangunge, came to be known as a 'targetted person' because he was said to have been in love with a Muslim girl. He used to go to see his parents every weekend and travelled by bus from Dacca to Narayangunge. Once he came to Sukomal and told him that during one of these bus journeys he had been threatened with death. Within a fortnight of this conversation, while the fever of the Hazratbal incident was still on, some people came to his hostel, dragged him out and killed him. There were about two hundred Muslim students, and some thirty Hindus in the same class. Of these two hundred Muslims only one – Mohsin Ahmed – said any words of sympathy. The rest, though attending the same class, and spending most of the day with the Hindu students, were completely indifferent to the plight of the latter. However Mohsin told Sukomal and other Hindu students to go away to India if they could manage it, because the situation was fast getting out of control. Even after the fever subsided, the total atmosphere was absolutely demoralising. Sukomal finally crossed over to India by a clandestine route across the River Gomati on the Tripura border by paying Rs 50 to an agent, came to Calcutta via Agartala, and managed to enroll himself in Bengal Engineering College in West Bengal in the same class as this author.

The middle-class among the Hindus, the upper and middle castes, kept on trying to emigrate to India, even at the cost of losing their jobs, and of course, their property. Most of them sent their college-going children, especially girls, to India. When they gave their girls in marriage they invariably chose grooms from India, so that they could in this

way develop a leg in their eventual refuge. The lower castes, the really economically weak classes, such as Namahshudra, Kaibarta, Bagdi, Matua and others, did not have any of these options and stayed on in the name of whatever God they worshipped. The majority among the tiny Bengali Christian and Buddhist communities, mostly Catholics from Barisal and Noakhali, and Mahayana Buddhists from Chittagong respectively, also emigrated, though a few stayed back. The former settled down in the Taltola area of Calcutta, and thence spread out to the rest of India. The latter, with names like Barua, Kalita and Mutsuddi, stuck with their fellow Hindu Chittagong crowd in India, and became indistinguishable from them except for the Buddhist rituals which they practised privately. This community has intermarried extensively with Hindus in West Bengal, and may cease to exist separately from the Hindus very soon.

An interesting sidelight about the Buddhists must be mentioned. Sukomal Talukdar recalls that there were a few Buddhist villages around his village, but he had noted that the extent to which the Buddhists were harrassed by the Muslims was much less than that in the case of Hindus. He did not know the reason for this, but could attribute this only to the fact that the Buddhists ate beef like the Muslims. Furthermore, although the Mahayana Buddhists were idol worshippers, their worship was much less ostentatious than that of the Hindus, particularly in the fact that there was no beating of drums involved.

The plight of the Hindu still in East Bengal, ever apprehensive about the next pogrom, reminds one of the state of mind of the African-American adolescent girl in Tallahatchie county, Mississippi in the early 1950s, following the discovery of the bullet-ridden body of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African-American boy who had allegedly whistled at a white girl.

“Before Emmett Till’s murder I had known the fear of hunger, hell and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me – the fear of killed just because I was black. This was the worst of my fears. I knew that once I got food the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn’t have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn’t know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed.”[10]

Anne Moody’s girl could not become white, but the Hindu in East Bengal had a choice. He could convert, and continue to live in East Bengal without fear. In this regard one fact stands out. Among those who stayed back, barring a few stray exceptions, the Hindus as well as members of the small communities, despite all pressures and persuasion, staunchly refused to convert to Islam.

CHAPTER 8

[1] Matir Bhetore Kalo Haat : Shotru (Orpito) Sompotti Ain o Bangladesher Sonkhaloghu/

A Dark Hand Inside My Land : The Enemy (Vested) Property Act, and the Minorities in Bangladesh (Bilingual, in Bangla and English) by Dr. Dilip De, Shoili Prokasan, Chittagong, Bangladesh, !st Ed., 1999

[2]

ibid. p. 271-278

[3]

ibid. p. 392-410

[4]

Cutch is the North-westernmost part of the Indian state of Gujarat, bordering the Pakistani province of Sind. The Rann of Cutch is a low salty basin that surrounds the land mass. The Rann is inundated by the sea every monsoon. When dry it is a totally arid wasteland, and home to the Wild Ass, an animal extinct from other parts of the world.

[5] Matir Bhetore Kalo Haat etc. ibid. p 40-41
.
[6]

ibid. p. 183-184

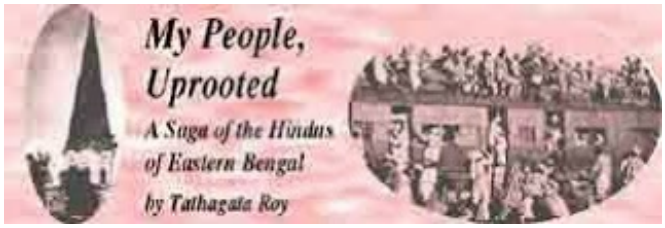
[7] (b. 1904) Retired Cement Technologist, ex-Manager, Assam Bengal Cement Co. Chhatak, Sylhet, interviewed January 21, 2000

[8] (b. 1910) Consulting Engineer, Calcutta. Interviewed April 1999
.
[9]

(b. 1933) Ex-employee, Durgapur Steel Plant. Interviewed August 2000.

[10] Coming of Age in Mississippi, by Anne Moody, 1st Ed., Doubleday, 1968, p. 129

Chapter 8



THE GORY CLIMAX : THE HOLOCAUST OF 1971

Meanwhile discontent continued to simmer in East Pakistan. There was increasing clamour for autonomy, and the leadership was provided mainly by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League, and also by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and his National Awami Party. The demand for autonomy and 'one man-one vote' found expression in the Mujib-led Awami League's six-point charter of demands. This principle of 'one man-one vote', if given effect to, would give an advantage to the numerically superior East Pakistanis, and was therefore staunchly resisted by the otherwise powerful West Pakistanis. Popular discontent against Ayub Khan and his puppet 'Basic Democrats' assumed such proportions that Ayub had to step down. Power was usurped by the army chief, Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan who immediately clamped Martial Law on both wings of the country.

Yahya Khan, as an administrator, was much worse than Ayub. Inordinately fond of Black Dog Scotch, and after-dinner peccadilloes with mature women, he had little time for much else. However, he decided to begin his reign with the right noises, and to that end announced his acceptance of the 'one man-one vote' principle. He also announced an election in December 1970.

The election was held, and resulted in a landslide victory for Mujib's Awami League. The party secured absolute majority - 167 seats in the Federal Assembly out of 313, and a whopping 298 seats out of 310 in the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had fought the election treating it as a referendum on his six-point charter of demands. There was no way now for West Pakistan to accept it, and no way for East Pakistan to compromise on it either. The final confrontation, the point of no return, had been reached between the two wings of what could arguably be the most absurd country on earth - two wings separated by a thousand miles of territory that they had chosen to be unfriendly with. Some desultory efforts followed, in the form of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's trip to Dacca and his talks with Mujib. Nothing much happened, and then the inevitable followed. On 25th and 26th March 1971 the Pakistan Army, under Lieutenant General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, cracked down on unarmed citizens of what was still their own country. And among such citizens were there any that they especially targeted? Yes, of course there were. They targeted the Hindus of East Pakistan.

It is usually referred to as crackdown, but it was a bloodbath, pure and simple murder and mayhem, by an army on defenceless civilians of their own country, in the manner of Mao Zedong's Red Guards, Heinrich Himmler's Schutzstaffeln (SS) and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. It was trampling of Human Rights on an unprecedented scale. The murder and mayhem took place throughout the length and breadth of East Pakistan, and it is as a result of this that more than ten million – one crore – East Pakistanis sought refuge in India. This time the refugees had a substantial number of Muslims among them. Not only so, but unspeakable atrocities were committed this time by West Pakistani Muslims on East Pakistani Muslims - as for example the Comilla Cantonment massacre, on 27th/28th of March, 1971, under the orders of CO 53 Field Regiment, Lt. Gen. Yakub Malik, in which 17 Bengali Officers and 915 men (all Muslims) were just slain by a flick of one Officer's fingers during their disarming[1]

. Bengali Muslim intellectuals and professionals with the slightest hint of sympathy to the Bangladeshi cause were suspect, and a lot of them fled to India, or at least left the towns for the countryside. Meanwhile the atrocities against Hindus continued with full force, in which the Pakistani Army was joined by the Urdu-speakers, mainly Biharis, and a not insubstantial number of pro-Pakistani Bengali Muslims also, who were organised in bands named Razakar and Al-Badr. These Bengali Muslims are known today in Bangladesh as Ekattorer Ghatak-Dalal (murderers and stooges of 1971).

Henry Kissinger's 'White House Years', in its Chapter XXI entitled 'The Tilt : The India-Pakistan Crisis of 1971' describes what happened at Washington, New Delhi and Islamabad during the days in great detail[2]

. It also mentions the crackdown of March 1971 in East Pakistan, choosing to name it rather cynically, after Talleyrand, as 'worse than a crime ; a blunder'. Characteristically, he is completely silent about the scale of the atrocities, the flagrancy of the Human Rights abuses, and attempted genocide of the Hindus that Senator Kennedy and Schanberg have mentioned.

'India Today', a respected newsmagazine of India, in its August 21, 2000 issue quotes from evidence given before the Hamoodur Rahman Commission, chaired upon by Hamoodur Rahman, Chief Justice of Pakistan. This Commission had been set up by Z.A.Bhutto, President of Pakistan in 1971 to investigate Pakistan's debacle in the Bangladesh war of Liberation. According to an article by Samar Halarnkar appearing in that issue of India Today, the first part of the report was destroyed by personal order of Bhutto, and not a single copy exists. A supplement was however prepared by the Commission after questioning the Pakistani POWs after they were repatriated from India. A copy of the report had come to the possession of India Today, and the full text of the report was available in the internet edition of the magazine[3]

.

Just to give few examples of the explosive material thet the report contains, consider this : Lt. Col. Aziz Ahmed Khan, Commanding Officer of 8 Baluch, said in his deposition before

the Commission "General Niazi asked as to how many Hindus we had killed. In May there was an order in writing to kill Hindus. This order was from Brigadier Abdullah Malik of 23 Brigade". According to Brigadier Iqbalur Rahman Shariff, GSO Division-1, Lt. General Gul Hasan (later Army chief) while visiting troops in East Pakistan used to routinely ask "How many Bengalis have you shot?". A part of the text of the relevant chapter of the report has been reproduced below.

This is the only period during which the history of the brutalities on Hindus was documented to some extent, and is not altogether unknown to the world. However, the intensity of the brutalities is another matter. One of the places where these brutalities took a particularly concentrated, bestial and inhuman form was in the Jagannath Hall massacre. This phase therefore needs to be dealt in some detail.

A detailed account of this massacre, down to some very macabre and gory details, have been recorded in the book "Dacca Bishshobidyalaye Gonohatya : 1971, Jagannath Hall" (in Bangla, meaning "Mass Murder in Dacca University : 1971, Jagannath Hall of Residence"). The recording is on the basis of interviews of eyewitnesses who escaped death very narrowly. A slightly abridged and shortened translation of a part of the introduction by the editor (to give an overview of the situation) and a few of the interviews appears below.

". . . . . Jagannath Hall was a Hall of Residence of Dacca University reserved for non-Muslim students, mainly Hindus. In 1971 a white paper published by the Pakistan Government said that Jagannath and Iqbal Halls were headquarters for armed insurrection. This was, however, far from the truth. . . . Right through the day of March 25 protest marches and similar activities took place. Most people were very apprehensive, but no one could foresee the magnitude and the severity of the bloodbath that would take place. Some of the residents of the university had left for the countryside for fear of trouble. The inmates of Jagannath Hall were, however, mostly students of very limited means who met the expenses of their education by giving private tuition, and most of them had stayed on at the Hall.
Around the midnight of 25-26 March the Pakistani Army broke down a wall, stormed into the Hall campus with tanks and stated mortar fire towards the northern block Simultaneously they also started an incessant barrage of machine-gun fire. Over their public address system they barked orders in English and Urdu to all residents to lay down arms and come out in the open.

Then the real carnage began. They entered every room, every toilet of the North and South Blocks, poked their heads into every water tank, and mercilessly machine-gunned whomever they could find. They set fire to the Western Block, the canteen and the attached tin shed, and gunned down whoever came out to flee from the fire. . . . They attacked and stormed the residence of Dr. Gobinda Chandra Deb (a former Provost of the Hall and a Professor of Philosophy of international repute) and killed Dr. Deb and the husband of his adopted daughter, Rokeya. They killed Dr. Muneer-uz-Zaman, Professor of Statistics, along with his entire family. They shot at Dr. Jyotirmay Guha Thakurta, the

Provost, who later died in a hospital, and also killed Madhusudan Dey and most of the family, including his pregnant wife, his son and his daughter-in-law. They then rounded up some of the Hall staff and some of the surviving students and ordered them to drag the corpses out of the buildings and into the quadrangle. Meanwhile they had rounded up some people from the adjoining areas. They included a few Hindu monks from the local Shibbari (Shiva temple), and a bearded man who was clearly a Muslim. Once the corpses had been laid out and neatly arranged, they ordered these people and the corpse-bearers to stand in a line and sprayed them with machine-gun fire from one end to the other. The soldiers then brought a Bulldozer, dug a shallow trench, and dozed the corpses into the trench and covered them with earth. . . . .

How many people had died in the carnage? It is not easy to answer the question, because the Provost's office was ransacked, and practically no records survived. . . . Attempts were made later by Professor Ajoy Kumar Roy, Provost of the Hall, in 1974 by corresponding with the families of the slain students and staff. This was found to be difficult in the case of those families who had in the meantime emigrated to India, and Professor Roy's list was incomplete. The task was later taken up by Professor Rangalal Sen, Provost, in 1981, and a more complete list was prepared. . . . . According to this list thirty-four students and three teachers - Gobinda Chandra Deb, Jyotirmay Guha Thakurta and Anudwaipayan Bhattacharyya - were killed. In addition, there were non-teaching staff of various departments of the University and the Hall resident at the Hall, such as demonstrators, laboratory assistants, an electrician, other artisans, cooks, janitors and others - all non-Muslims - among those killed. In addition to all these, also killed were several guests living in the Hall at the time, and some persons had come to visit the students or faculty members, and did not get a chance to return home. Their names were gathered from the persons interviewed during compilation of the account. Seven of them have been named, although practically nothing, other than their names and home towns were known. Three, probably four, of these were Muslims. Finally, the people buried in the mass grave in Jagannath Hall included those that were killed in the vicinity by the army, and were brought to the Hall for mass burial by a bulldozer. These included five Hindu monks of the Shibbari (Shiva Temple), some Hindu students residing at the Kalibari (Kali Temple) at Ramna and many others.

The late Dr. Noorul Ullah, a Professor of the Technological University, showed incredible courage in videotaping the shooting of the five monks and a few other scenes were from his house across the road, obviously at great personal risk to himself. He had wrapped his video camera in a piece of black cloth with only the lens exposed, positioned it next to the window facing the quadrangle and in that state shot scenes of the carnage in broad daylight. However, Professor Ullah had only one tape with him, and at one point of time apprehended that it was getting too dangerous to continue the taping. As a result the tapes, although invaluable as evidence, are somewhat disjointed. . . "
[4]

[Introduction by Editor]

So, how many people actually died in the carnage? As The Editor and Compiler Ratanlal

Chakraborty had remarked, it is impossible to get a correct figure. Begum Rokeya, adopted daughter of the slain Dr. Gobinda Chandra Deb, puts the figure at 'hundreds',[5] but her observation is based on the number of corpses that she saw lying in the quadrangle, and she must have been totally disoriented then by grief at the loss of her husband and her adoptive father, and in no state to count corpses. Dr. Noorul Ullah, in a saner frame of mind, mentions a figure of 70/80 in respect of the corpses which he saw (and videotaped) being bulldozed into a mass grave in the Jagannath Hall quadrangle[6]. Assuming that all the corpses had not been dragged out by the Pakistani soldiers, the total number killed would be somewhere around a hundred. The point in this massacre however is not the number. The point is the bestiality exhibited by the Pakistanis, the wantonness, the sheer disregard for human life, the very casual way in which they killed defenceless citizens of their own country. As the excerpt below from an interview will reveal[7]

.

"I had become very friendly with Dr. Jyotirmay Guha Thakurta, the Provost of the Hall. He loved flowers, and it was my job to grow flowers. He was particularly fond of Rajanigandha, the tuberose that grows in profusion in East Bengal, and asked for a sapling of the same on 25th March evening when I had gone to visit him. We both talked about the situation in the city and agreed that it seemed quite bad that particular evening . . . . . Sometime around midnight we heard sounds of brush fire. We heard the army approaching the hall from the direction of the Public Library. We could make out that they had surrounded the hall. There was a loud bang, and the whole area was lit with a red glow. We kept lying on the ground. They entered the hall sometime around three in the morning. Shibu, the son of Gayanath, was on duty at the gate. The soldiers first thrashed the poor man roundly and then addressed him in Urdu and said "Sale, tere Mujibur bapko bula" (Bastards, get your dad Mujibur down here). They asked Shibu for the whereabouts of the student-inmates of the hall. Shibu truthfully replied that they had all left for their homes abut a month ago. They asked about us, and Shibu replied that we were all non-teaching staff of the university. They ordered Shibu to fetch us. Shibu came to our quarters and took Bihari Das's eldest son with him. As soon as this poor guy reached there they started beating him with rifle butts. They also started to fire towards the North Block. I decided to get out and see things for myself. I wrapped myself in a black cloth, told my mother to keep absolutely quiet, and ventured out into the open. They were beating up someone behind Biraj-da's quarters. One of them noticed me, and came after me, but I ran and hid myself in a duck-coop, and then in the cattle-shed, and they could not find me in the dark. Meanwhile this batch of soldiers left and another batch came. This new batch set fire to the tin shed canteen - probably they used some chemical powder.

Meanwhile some four soldiers caught hold of a sweeper called Buddhu, and bayoneted him. As they kept thrusting their bayonets into Buddhu's stomach, the poor man kept crying and choking, repeating that he was merely a Bhangi, a lowly sweeper of garbage.

Then it struck one of them that there was no point in going after this man, and they left the poor guy in that condition.

I was all along hiding in the cattle-shed. They sensed that there was someone inside, so they set fire to the shed too. I had to come out. I ran home and told my mother to sit still and leave the door open - maybe they will not harm an old woman like her. Around five in the morning it began to get lighter, and we could no longer hide from the soldiers. They surrounded us, and separated the relatively young people like us from the older, and told us to stand in a line in front of the shed where Khagen and Shyamlal used to tend the cattle. I do not remember how many of us were there. There were a few students too, clad in torn undershirts and lungis. They set up a light machine-gun right in front of us. There was an officer, possibly a Major, standing in front of us. Meanwhile they were constantly abusing us in filthy language in Punjabi, telling us to call our dad Mujibur. Some of us were quiet, while some others were loudly begging for mercy. They first asked us to enter the cattle-shed, then ordered us out, then marched us to a place where a Captain was sitting on a heap of stones. The Captain laughed at our state and called us Bengali motherf___s. Some of us again appealed to him to spare our lives. The Captain in reply asked us to say "Joy Bangla" (Victory to Bangla), and call our dad Mujibur Rahman to save us. Then he asked us whether we were prepared to do what he asked us to do ; if we did as he told us to, he said he would let us go. The thought of being allowed to live made us go crazy, and we readily agreed.

The soldiers then divided us into two groups, and asked us to drag the corpses out. Two soldiers accompanied each group and held sten-guns to our backs. We were first taken to a warehouse on the road leading to the Shibbari. Some ten or twelve corpses were lying there. I did not know any of them. They seemed to have been rounded up from all over the place and sprayed with bullets. The floor of the warehouse was awash with blood. Shyamlal and I dragged out a corpse in put it down in the location where the present Shaheed-Minar (Monument to the martyrs) is located. We were ordered to arrange the corpses with their heads all on one side. Meanwhile the soldiers discovered some five or six students hiding in the water tank on the terrace. They lined them all up along the edge of the terrace and sprayed them with bullets, and we watched the bodies fall. In course of dragging the corpses we also had to carry Dr. Deb's body.

We were then taken to the first house next to the Shibbari where Madhuda (Madhusudan Dey) used to live. We saw his pregnant wife lying dead on the floor. Madhuda himself was reclining against a wall with a gunshot wound on his chest, which was bleeding profusely. His younger daughter, also bleeding, was hugging on to him and crying. The Pakistani soldiers abused all of us, including the little girl, and told us to drag Madhuda out without wasting any time. Shyamlal and I managed to half-carry Madhuda out without dragging him. We brought him to the quadrangle where the corpses were lined up. Madhuda asked us who they were, were they all dead? I replied " Yes, they are all dead. You wouldn't know who they were, they were from outside. We are going to share their fate very soon. There is no point in straining yourself, you better lie down". By this time Madhuda was very weak from loss of blood, and lay down. While we were

taking Madhuda out the Pakistani solders were lining the path. Quite a few of them were drinking straight from bottles, some were warming tea. All along they continued to abuse us in filthy language, asking us to say 'Joy Bangla', or to call our dad Mujibur.

Meanwhile the Pakistanis dragged out four Sadhus (Hindu monks) from the Shibbari on to the quadrangle. I knew two among them. One of them was called Brajananda Sadhu and the other was his favourite disciple Mukindra (Mukunda?) Sadhu, whom I knew very well. But I did not know what to say to him in the face of sure death. We had lost the will to run away. I was thinking of my mother and sister. The soldiers made the sadhus stand next to me, and told all of us to keep standing.

Meanwhile all the corpses had been brought into the quadrangle. I saw that there were no women among them, nor any children. I saw Dr. G.C.Deb's corpse. He was a fat man in life, but now his body was bloated almost beyond recognition. It was around nine in the morning then. As far as I remember, Shyamlal and I, working as a team, must have dragged around twenty corpses. I wanted to talk to Shyamlal, but his throat was parched from fear, and he could not talk. Among the corpses there were some people still alive, one of them a bearded Moulana (Muslim priest). He was trying to recite the Kalma (words from the Quran). The soldiers who had made us drag the corpses now left us and were replaced by another six. These six were so drunk that they were slurring over the words while abusing us. They kept on telling us, bastards, stand in a line, you sonofabitches, stand in a line, don't delay, you motherf___s, stand in a line. I cannot describe our reaction at this command, because we knew that these would be the last words we would hear. Some of us began to beg for mercy, some wanted to have a last look at their families. The soldiers kicked them to the ground and ordered them to stand up again. I decided not to beg anything from these beasts. Then they started firing at us, beginning from the end far from where I was standing. My elder brother was standing a few places away from me. A Moulvi (Muslim priest) standing next to me was reciting from the Quran. He took a step towards them and they shot him three times. Then my turn came. They aimed at me and shot. I was hit in the thigh and fell down next to a corpse. While in that state I saw my brother take a shot and fall down. People were rolling over, begging for their lives, moaning. My brother after falling down wanted to get up. I pressed his arm to signal him to keep lying down. I also heard an impossible sound - the sound of falling blood, just the way falling water makes a sound. Blood was spurting from quite a few bodies, just like water gushing from a tap. Through the corner of my eyes I saw the Pakistani soldiers taking aim and shooting at those that were still moving. I lay still, trying very hard to keep my brother from getting up. My brother was struggling to get up, mumbling that he wanted to see his wife and daughter.

Then the Pakistani soldiers left, rather suddenly. There were about a hundred and fifty of them, but they all left in one go. As soon as they left my brother got up and tried to run towards his home, but stumbled and fell on his face. Meanwhile the women and children cane running towards us, carrying pitchers of water. The place was full of cries of 'Jol, Jol'[8]

('water, water'!). I saw my mother, sister and sister-in-law. By that time I was very weak, and could see them only through a haze. I told them to take me home. They took me home but could not find my elder brother - the poor man must have died under the weight of corpses that fell on him. I saw Bindu's mother trying to take her husband home. I saw our electrician Chitballi running around aimlessly, crazed with fear. I felt I was sinking. I told my mother to leave me with a jug of water. They all left. I tried to lift the jug to my lips, but did not have the strength to do so. Then I saw my mother had returned with a few boys, and was entreating them to take me to the Medical College. The boys then laid me on a door shutter that they got from somewhere, covered me with a piece of cloth and took me running, through Buxibazar to the Medical College, through the rear gate. The doctors then surrounded me and started questioning me - was I a student, what had really happened at Jagannath Hall, and so on. Then their Professor came on the scene, told them not to question me further, and took me to the Operation Theatre. One of the last things that I felt was that the doctors were feeling me all over - wherever they poked a finger the flesh yielded.

After weeks of treatment I recovered and left the hospital. Later I heard that the soldiers had come back to the scene with tractors (bulldozers?) and trucks and picked up as many corpses as they could and dozed the rest into the ground"
[Interview of Chand Deb Roy, Hindu, Mali (Horticulturist), Botany Department, Dacca University][9]

.

An Indian Press Correspondent, Chand Joshi of 'The Hindusthan Times', New Delhi[10]

, narrated the bitter record of the Pakistani Army's barbarities in Bangladesh as follows:

"The tears are not yet dry. The stench of death still fills the nostrils as one walks through many of Dacca's streets. Perhaps all this is imagination? One could only pinch oneself to find out whether it was just a cruel nightmare or whether all this was reality.

On Nawabpur Road a pregant girl ran around, her hair dishevelled, her saree torn and shouting ‘Na, na, na’ (No, no, no!). She no longer had any name. She is mad. But a few months ago, she had a face, a figure and a name. She was a Dacca college student. She was, that is till the Pakistani Army took her away to the cantonment. Nobody could ask her what happened, for she cannot talk anymore. Only at the first sight of people approaching her she shrinks back and shouts ‘Na, na, na’.

An Indian army officer said that she was perhaps luckier than some others. She might even be cured. Most of them never had a chance. At the Dacca cantonment young girls were rounded up and then made to fall in naked. Some tried to hide their breasts with their hair. The mocking soldiers would brush their hair aside with a 'Dekhne do’ ‘(Let’s have a look’). The soldiers would form into company formations and choose the girls. Innumerable times, innumerable soldiers chose the girls till they collapsed. They would then mockingly cut off their breasts or bayonet them through the vagina. Those who

were liked particularly would be kept for a repeat performance every hour of the day. Most of then who were recovered were pregnent. A majority had been killed. At Brahmanbaria the Indian army recovered nude women, dead or almost senseless with continued rape, from trenches. Apart from Dacca, in Jessore, Faridpur, Tangail and everywhere the same thing happened. In a village near Dacca, a father was asked at bayonet point to rape his daughter. When he refused the soldiers raped the girl in the father's presence. The soldier then bayoneted his daughter to death. Mercifully they hanged the father also for the crime of refusing to obey the orders.

The story was repeated in exactly the same manner by at least half a dozen persons from the village. The living proof of atrocities committed by the occupation forces was the recovery of the bodies of intellectuals who were killed on Dec 15, a day before the surrender. They included prominent doctors, intellectutals and journalists, including the BBC's representative in Dacca.

People may exaggerate, but the evidence of one's eyes cannot lie. Burnt-out, broken localities, bullet holes on the walls of houses, the stains of blood -- all speak of the enemy's barbarity. In one such locality, Sankhari Patti[11]

in Dacca, there is not a single house standing. Massive old buildings were raised to the ground after being looted. Some of them were shelled. And what about their inmates? Those who were lucky stayed in the houses to be buried alive. Those who ran out were mowed down by machinegun fire from all sides.

The law then was simple. If there was an explosion anywhere, the people within a radius of 500 yards were to be punished. A cracker was set off and units of the army and Razakars moved in and mowed down everybody in sight. In villages near the Mirzapur industrial area, they shot about 1000 people on suspicion that they belonged to the East Pakistan Rifles or the East Bengal Regiment. The procedure was direct. All males available would be rounded up and shot. They would then turn over the bodies to see whether there was any identification supporting their suspicion. In the Razakar-infested localities of Mohammedpur and Mirpur, there were ceremonial sacrifices of Bengalis. In sector 12, the quota was fixed at 25 a day. People were picked up and their throats slashed till they bled to death. We met a man from that area. Of a family of 19 members, he was the only one who survived. He says nothing any more. He only wants to get back to search in local well for the bodies so that he may give his family members a decent burial. There are many such wells in the locality. Nobody drinks water from them since they know that the bottom is full of bodies. The fish from smaller rivers have no buyers for the same reason. They had been fed on corpses. At one point 100 hilsas were being offered for Rs 2 but nobody would take it."

People had come to know of Jagannath Hall and Dacca city, and the massacres there were documented, because it was the provincial capital., and had a concentrated Hindu population. What had happened in the countryside must have been just as bad. What was the picture if the totality of East Pakistan is taken into account? Consider the following statements:

"Field reports to the U.S. Government, countless eye-witness journalistic accounts, reports of International agencies such as World Bank and additional information available to the subcommittee document the reign of terror which grips East Bengal (East Pakistan). Hardest hit have been members of the Hindu community, who have been robbed of their lands and shops, systematically slaughtered, and in some places painted with yellow patches marked "H". All of this has been officially sanctioned, ordered and implemented under martial law from Islamabad. .." (Senator Edward Kennedy)[12]

"I covered the war and witnessed first the population's joyous welcome of the Indian soldiers as liberators . . . . . Later I toured the country by road to see the Pakistani legacy firsthand. In town after town there was an execution area where people had been killed by bayonet, bullet and bludgeon. In some towns, executions were held on a daily basis. . . . . This was a month after the war's end (i.e. January 1972), ... human bones were still scattered along many roadsides. Blood stained clothing and tufts of human hair clung to the brush at these killing grounds. Children too young to understand were playing grotesque games with skulls. Other reminders were the yellow "H"s the Pakistanis had painted on the homes of Hindus, particular targets of the Muslim army." (Sydney Schanberg)[13]

U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy in his report gives following details about the refugees from Bangladesh in 1971. As of October 25, 1971, 9.54 million refugees from East Pakistan had crossed over to India. The average influx as of October 1971 was 10,645 refugees a day[14]. Hence the total refugee population at the start of Bangla Desh war on December 3, 1971 was about 10 million[15]. . . . . Sen. Kennedy further mentions that Government of India had set up separate refugee camps for Hindus and Muslims where possible, i.e. refugee camps of Hindus were located in Hindu majority areas and similarly Muslim camps were located in Muslim majority areas. The communal representation of the refugees was 80 percent Hindu, 15 per cent Muslim, and 5 per cent Christian and others.(Shrinandan Vyas)[16]

"In the 1971 war of liberation 200,000 women were raped . . . . Hundreds of thousands were victims of mass murders" (Mrs. Sheikh Hasina Wajed)[17]

One of the campaigns mounted against the people of East Pakistan by the West Pakistani army was the attempt at annihiliation of all professionals and intellectuals. This was done in the closing stages of the war, when it was all but known that East Pakistan would fall, and was probably directed at depriving the future republic of Bangladesh of its entire brainpower. This was done through the agency of two fundamentalist Bengali Muslim groups known as Razakar and Al-Badr. The victims were almost entirely Muslim, since most Hindu professionals and intellectuals had emigrated to India long ago, and among the few that remained, a number were killed in the Jagannath Hall massacre. Shahriyar Kabir, a contemporary Bangladeshi author and journalist has recorded the experience of one of those who managed to get away

It would now be of interest to see how Pakistan looked at its own misdeeds, with a

special reference to the subject of this book, that is the persecution and killing of Hindus. The best source for this is the Hamoodur Rahman report mentioned earlier. The full text of the supplementary report was placed in the Internet edition of the 'India Today' newsmagazine of August 21, 2000. Of the report, Part 5, Chapter 2 deals with the atrocities. To the extent admitted in the report, there can be no greater proof of the atrocities, and certain parts of the above chapter of the report are reproduced below.

(REPORT BEGINS)

1.Alleged atrocities by the Pakistan Army
As is well known, the conduct of the Pakistani army, while engaged in counter-insurgency measures in East Pakistan since March 1971, has come in for a lot of criticism from several quarters. We had occasion to deal with the subject in Paragraphs 5-8 of Chapter II of Part V of the Main Report. We have examined this question further in the light of fresh evidence recorded by us.

Misdeeds of the Awami League Militants:
2. It is necessary that this painful chapter of the events in East Pakistan be looked at in its proper perspective. Let it not be forgotten that the initiative in resorting to violence and cruelty was taken by the militants of the Awami League, during the month of March, 1971, following General Yahya Khan's announcement of the 1st of March regarding the postponement of the session of the National Assembly scheduled for the 3rd of March 1971. It will be recalled that from the 1st of March to the 3rd of March 1971, the Awami League had taken complete control of East Pakistan, paralysing the authority of the federal government. There is reliable evidence to show that during this period the miscreants indulged in large scale massacres and rape against pro-Pakistan elements, in the towns of Dacca, Narayanganj, Chittagong, Chandragona, Rungamati, Khulna, Dinajpur, Dhakargaoa (Thakurgaon?), Kushtia, Ishuali (Ishurdi?), Noakhali, Sylhet, Maulvi Bazaar, Rangpur, Saidpur, Jessore, Barisal, Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Pabna, Sirojgonj, Comilla, Brahmanbaria, Bogra, Naugaon, Santapur (Santahar?) and several other smaller places.

3. Harrowing tales of these atrocities were narrated by the large number of West Pakistanis and Biharis who were able to escape from these places and reach the safety of West Pakistan. For days on end, all through the troubled month of March 1971, swarms of terrorised non-Bengalis lay at the Army-controlled Dacca airport awaiting their turn to be taken to the safety of West Pakistan. Families of West Pakistani officers and other ranks serving with East Bengal units were subjected to inhuman treatment, and a large number of West Pakistani officers were butchered by the erstwhile Bengali colleagues.

4. These atrocities were completely blacked out at the time by the Government of Pakistan for fear of retaliation by the Bengalis living in West Pakistan. The Federal Government did issue a White Paper in this behalf in August 1971, but unfortunately it

did not create much impact for the reason that it was highly belated, and adequate publicity was not given to it in the national and international press.

5. However, recently, a renowned journalist of high standing, Mr Qutubuddin Aziz, has taken pains to marshal the evidence in a publication called Blood and Tears. The book contains the harrowing tales of inhuman crimes committed on the helpless Biharis, West Pakistanis and patriotic Bengalis living in East Pakistan during that period. According to various estimates mentioned by Mr. Qutubuddin Aziz, between 100,000 and 500,000 persons were slaughtered during this period by the Awami League militants.

6. As far as we can judge, Mr Qutubuddin Aziz has made use of authentic personal accounts furnished by the repatriates whose families, have actually suffered at the hands of the Awami League militants. He has also extensively referred to the contemporary accounts of foreign correspondents then stationed in East Pakistan. The plight of the non-Bengali elements still living in Bangladesh and the insistence of that Government on their large-scale repatriation to Pakistan, are factors which appear to confirm the correctness of the allegations made against the Awami League in this behalf.

Provocation of the Army

7. We mention these facts not in justification of the atrocities or other crimes alleged to have been committed by the Pakistani Army during its operations in East Pakistan, but only to put the record straight and to enable the allegations to be judged in their correct perspective. The crimes committed by the Awami League miscreants were bound to arouse anger and bitterness in the minds of the troops, especially when they were not confined to barracks during these weeks immediately preceding the military action, but were also subjected to the severest of humiliations. They had seen their comrades insulted, deprived of food and ration, and even killed without rhyme or reason. Tales of wholesale slaughter of families of West Pakistani officers and personnel of several units had also reached the soldiers who were after all only human, and reacted violently in the process of restoring the authority of the Central Government.

The Nature of Allegations

8. According to the allegations generally made, the excesses committed by the Pakistani Army fall into the following categories:

a) Excessive use of force and fire power in Dacca during the night of the 25th and 26th of March 1971 when the military operation was launched.

b) Senseless and wanton arson and killings in the countryside during the course of the “sweeping operations” following the military action.

c) Killing of intellectuals and professionals like doctors, engineers, etc and burying them in mass graves not only during early phases of the military action but also during the critical days of the war in December 1971.

d) Killing of Bengali Officers and men of the units of the East Bengal Regiment, East Pakistan Rifles and the East Pakistan Police Force in the process of disarming them, or on pretence of quelling their rebellion.

e) Killing of East Pakistani civilian officers, businessmen and industrialists, or their

mysterious disappearance from their homes by or at the instance of Army Officers performing Martial Law duties.
f) Raping of a large number of East Pakistani women by the officers and men of the Pakistan army as a deliberate act of revenge, retaliation and torture.
g) Deliberate killing of members of the Hindu minority.

Substance of Evidence
9. In view of the seriousness of the allegations, their persistence and their international impact as well as their fundamental importance from the point of view of moral and mental discipline of the Pakistan Army, we made it a point of questioning the repatriated officers at some length in this behalf. We feel that a brief reference to some typical statements made before us by responsible military and civil officers will be instructive, and helpful in reaching the necessary conclusions.

10. Lt. Gen. A.A.K. Niazi, apparently in an endeavour to put the blame on his predecessor, then Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan, stated that "military action was based on use of force primarily, and at many places indiscriminate use of force was resorted to which alienated the public against the Army. Damage done during those early days of the military action could never be repaired, and earned for the military leaders names such as "Changez Khan" and "Butcher of East Pakistan." While the military action was on, the then Martial Law Administration alienated the world press by unceremoniously hounding out foreign correspondents from East Pakistan, thus losing out in the propaganda war to the Indians completely. He went on to add: "on the assumption of command I was very much concerned with the discipline of troops, and on 15th of April, 1971, that is within four days of my command, I addressed a letter to all formations located in the area and insisted that loot, rape, arson, killing of people at random must stop and a high standard of discipline should be maintained. I had come to know that looted material had been sent to West Pakistan which included cars, refrigerators and air conditioners etc."

When asked about the alleged killing of East Pakistani officers and men during the process of disarming, the General replied that he had heard something of the kind but all these things had happened in the initial stages of the military action before his time. He denied the allegation that he ever ordered his subordinates to exterminate the Hindu minority. He denied that any intellectuals were killed during December 1971. He admitted that there were a few cases of rape, but asserted that the guilty persons were duly punished. He also stated that "these things do happen when troops are spread over. My orders were that there would not be less than a company. When a company is there, there is an officer with them to control them but if there is a small picket like section, then it is very difficult to control. In Dacca jail we had about 80 persons punished for excesses."

11. Another significant statement was made in this regard by Maj. Gen. Rao Farman Ali, Adviser to the Governor of East Pakistan namely: "Harrowing tales of rape, loot, arson, harassment, and of insulting and degrading behaviour were narrated in general terms. I wrote out an instruction to act as a guide for decent behaviour and recommended action

required to be taken to win over the hearts of the people. This instruction under General Tikka Khan's signature was sent to Eastern Command. I found that General Tikka's position was also deliberately undermined and his instructions ignored...excesses were explained away by false and concocted stories and figures."

12. About the use of excessive force on the night between the 25th and 26th March 1971, we have a statement from Brigadier Shah Abdul Qasim (witness No. 267) to the effect that "no pitched battle was fought on the 25th of March in Dacca. Excessive force was used on that night. Army personnel acted under the influence of revenge and anger during the military operation." It has also been alleged that mortars were used to blast two Residence Halls, thus causing excessive casualties. In defence, it has been stated that these Halls were at the relevant time not occupied by the students but by Awami League insurgents, and were also being used as dumps for arms and ammunition stored by the Awami League for its armed rebellion.

13. Still another significant statement came from Brigadier Mian Taskeenuddin (Witness No. 282): "Many junior and other officers took the law into their own hands to deal with the so called miscreants. There have been cases of interrogation of miscreants which were far more severe in character than normal and in some cases blatantly in front of the public. The discipline of the Pakistani army as was generally understood had broken down. In a command area (Dhoom Ghat) between September and October miscreants were killed by firing squads. On coming to know about it I stopped the same forthwith."

14. Maj. Gen. Nazar Hussain Shah, GOC 16 Division, conceded that "there were rumours that Bengalis were disposed of without trial." Similarly, Brigadier Abdul Qadir Khan (Witness No. 243) Commander 93 (A)? admitted that "a number of instance of picking up Bengalis did take place." Lt. Col. S.S.H. Bokhari, CO of 29 Cavalry, appearing as Witness no 244, stated that "in Rangpur two officers and 30 men were disposed of without trial. It may have happened in other stations as well."

An admission was also made by Lt. Col. S.M. Naeem (Witness No 258), CO of 39 Baluch, that "innocent people were killed by us during sweep operations and it created estrangement amongst the public."

15. Lt Col. Mansoorul Haq, GSO-I, Division, appearing as Witness No 260, has made detailed and specific allegations as follows: "A Bengali, who was alleged to be a Mukti Bahini or Awami Leaguer, was being sent to Bangladesh — a code name for death without trial, without detailed investigations and without any written order by any authorised authority." Indiscriminate killing and looting could only serve the cause of the enemies of Pakistan. In the harshness, we lost the support of the silent majority of the people of East Pakistan. The Comilla Cantt massacre (on 27th/28th of March, 1971) under the orders of CO 53 Field Regiment, Lt. Gen. Yakub Malik, in which 17 Bengali Officers and 915 men were just slain by a flick of one Officer's fingers, should suffice as an example. There was a general feeling of hatred against Bengalis amongst the soldiers and officers, including Generals. There were verbal instructions to eliminate Hindus. In

Salda Nadi(?) area about 500 persons were killed. When the army moved to clear the rural areas and small towns, it moved in a ruthless manner, destroying, burning and killing. The rebels while retreating carried out reprisals against non-Bengalis.

16. Several civilian officers have also deposed in a similar vein, and it would suffice to quote here the words of Mr. Mohammad Ashraf, Additional Deputy Commissioner, Dacca, to whose evidence we have also referred earlier in another context. He stated that "after the military action the Bengalis were made aliens in their own homeland. The life, property, and honour of even the most highly placed among them were not safe. People were picked up from their homes on suspicion and dispatched to Bangladesh, a term used to describe summary executions. The victims included Army and Police Officers, businessmen, civilian officers, etc. There was no Rule of Law in East Pakistan. A man had no remedy if he was on the wanted list of the Army... Army Officers who were doing intelligence were raw hands, ignorant of the local language and callous of Bengali sensibilities."

17. About the attitude of senior officers in this behalf, Brigadier Iqbalur Rehman Shariff (Witness no. 269), has alleged that during his visit to formations in East Pakistan General Gul Hassan used to ask the soldiers "how many Bengalis have you shot".

18. The statements appearing in the evidence of Lt. Col. Aziz Ahmed Khan (Witness no 276) who was Commanding Officer 8 Baluch and then CO 86 Mujahid Battalion are also directly relevant. "Brigadier Arbab also told me to destroy all houses in Joydebpur. To a great extent I executed this order. General Niazi visited my unit at Thakargaon and Bogra. He asked us how many Hindus we had killed. In May, there was an order in writing to kill Hindus. This order was from Brigadier Abdullah Malik of 23 Brigade."

19. While the extracts of evidence given above reflect the general position in regard to the allegations we are considering, it appears to be necessary to deal specifically with certain matters brought to the notice of the Prime Minister of Pakistan by the Bangladesh authorities, or which have otherwise been particularly mentioned by certain witnesses appearing before the Commission during the present session.

Painting the Green of East Pakistan Red

20. During his meeting with the Prime Minister of Pakistan at Dacca on Friday, the 28th of June 1974, the Bangladesh Prime Minister Sh. Mujibur Rehman, complained inter-alia that Maj Gen Rao Farman Ali had written in his own hand on Government stationery that "The green of East Pakistan will have to be painted red." Sh. Mujibur Rehman promised to supply a photostat copy of this document to the Government of Pakistan." The same has since been received . . . . . The insinuation is that this writing amounted to a written declaration of the intentions of the Pakistan Army and the martial law administration in East Pakistan to indulge in large-scale bloodshed in order to suppress the movement for Bangladesh.. . . . . .

Magnitude of Atrocities

31. In the circumstances that prevailed in East Pakistan from the 1st of March to the 16th

of December 1971, it was hardly possible to obtain an accurate estimate of the toll of death and destruction caused by the Awami League militants and later by the Pakistan Army. It must also be remembered that even after the military action of the 25th of march 1971, Indian infiltrators and members of the Mukti Bahini sponsored by the Awami League continued to indulge in killings, rape and arson during their raids on peaceful villages in East Pakistan, not only in order to cause panic and disruption and carry out their plans of subversion, but also to punish those East Pakistanis who were not willing to go along with them. In any estimate of the extent of atrocities alleged to have been committed on the East Pakistani people, the death and destruction caused by the Awami League militants throughout this period and the atrocities committed by them on their own brothers and sisters must, therefore, always be kept in view.

32. According to the Bangladesh authorities, the Pakistan Army was responsible for killing three million Bengalis and raping 200,000 East Pakistani women. It does not need any elaborate argument to see that these figures are obviously highly exaggerated. So much damage could not have been caused by the entire strength of the Pakistan Army then stationed in East Pakistan even if it had nothing else to do. In fact, however, the army was constantly engaged in fighting the Mukti Bahini, the Indian infiltrators, and later the Indian army. It has also the task of running the civil administration, maintaining communications and feeding 70 million people of East Pakistan. It is, therefore, clear that the figures mentioned by the Dacca authorities are altogether fantastic and fanciful.

33. Different figures were mentioned by different persons in authority but the latest statement supplied to us by the GHQ shows approximately 26,000 persons killed during the action by the Pakistan Army. This figure is based on situation reports submitted from time to time by the Eastern Command to the General Headquarters. It is possible that even these figures may contain an element of exaggeration as the lower formations may have magnified their own achievements in quelling the rebellion. However, in the absence of any other reliable date, the Commission is of the view that the latest figure supplied by the GHQ should be accepted. An important consideration which has influenced us in accepting this figure as reasonably correct is the fact that the reports were sent from East Pakistan to GHQ at a time when the Army Officers in East Pakistan could have had no notion whatsoever of any accountability in this behalf.

34. The falsity of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s repeated allegation that Pakistani troops had raped 200,000 Bengali girls in 1971 was borne out when the abortion team he had commissioned from Britain in early 1972 found that its workload involved the termination of only a hundred or more pregnancies.

Question of Responsibility

35. For almost three years now, the world has repeatedly heard a list of 195 names said to have been prepared by the Dacca authorities in connection with the commission of these atrocities and crimes. As the Commission has not been supplied with a copy of this list, it is not possible for us to comment upon the justification or otherwise of the inclusion of any particular names therein. It is, however, clear that the final and overall

responsibility must rest on General Yahya Khan, Lt. Gen. Pirzada, Maj Gen. Umar, Lt. Gen. Mitha. It has been brought out in evidence that Maj. Gen. Mitha was particularly active in East Pakistan in the days preceding the military action of the 25th of March 1971, and even the other Generals just mentioned were present in Dacca along with Yahya Khan, and secretly departed there on the evening of that fateful day after fixing the deadline for the military action. Maj. Gen. Mitha is said to have remained behind. There is also evidence that Lt. Gen Tikka Khan, Maj. Gen. Farman Ali and Maj. Gen Khadim Hussain were associated with the planning of the military action. There is, however, nothing to show that they contemplated the use of excessive force or the Commission of atrocities and excesses on the people of East Pakistan.

36. The immediate responsibility for executing the plan of this action fell on Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan who succeeded Lt. Gen. Mohammad Yakub on the 7th of March 1971 as Zonal Administrator, Martial Law, as well as Commander Eastern Command. This last responsibility was passed on by him to Lt. Gen. A.A.K. Niazi on the 7th of April 1971. From that day until the day of surrender the troops in East Pakistan remained under the operational control of Lt. Gen. Niazi who also assumed powers of the Martial Law administrator on the appointment of a civilian Governor in August 1971. It is a question for determination as to what share of responsibility must rest on these commanders for the excesses allegedly committed by the troops under their Command. It is in evidence that Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan was always willing to redress grievances and take disciplinary action whenever complaints of excesses were brought to his notice. It has also to be said that both these Generals had issued repeated warnings to troops to refrain from acts of violence and immorality. At the same time there is some evidence to suggest that the words and personal actions of Lt. Gen. Niazi were calculated to encourage the killings and rape.

37. The direct responsibility of the alleged excesses and atrocities must, of course, rest on those officers and men who physically perpetuated them or knowingly and deliberately allowed them to be so perpetuated. These officers and men not only showed lack of discipline in disobeying the directives of the Eastern Command and Zonal Martial Law Administrator, but also indulged in criminal acts punishable under the Army Act as well as the ordinary law of the land.

Conclusions and Recommendations

38. From what we have said in the preceding paragraphs it is clear that there is substance in the allegations that during and after the military action excesses were indeed committed on the people of East Pakistan, but the versions and estimates put forward by the Dacca authorities are highly coloured and exaggerated. Some of the incidents alleged by those authorities did not take place at all, and on others fanciful interpretations have been deliberately placed for the purpose of maligning the Pakistan army and gaining world sympathy. We have also found that the strong provocation was offered to the army owing to the misdeeds of the Awami League. It has also been stated that use of force was undoubtedly inherent in the military action required to restore the authority of the Federal Government. Nevertheless, inspite of all these factors we are of

the view that the officers charged with the task of restoring law and order were under an obligation to act with restraint and to employ only the minimum force necessary for the purpose. No amount of provocation by the militants of the Awami League or other miscreants could justify retaliation by a disciplined army against its own people. The Pakistan Army was called upon to operate in Pakistan territory, and could not, therefore, be permitted to behave as if it was dealing with external aggression or operating on enemy soil. Irrespective, therefore, of the magnitude of the atrocities, we are of the considered opinion that it is necessary for the Government of Pakistan to take effective action to punish those who were responsible for the commission of these alleged excesses and atrocities"

(REPORT ENDS)

What is one to make of this report? Well, for one, the recording of evidence seems to have been done fairly meticulously. The problem is not so much with the facts that the Commission had unearthed, as with the conclusions that they drew from them. Let us take them one by one.

(a) This part of the report begins with tales of the insults and humiliation, and even physical damage suffered by Pakistani soldiers at the hands of Awami Leaguers. No details are given, but it is presumed that these could serve as mitigating circumstances in respect of mass murders committed by the army. It is more than a little difficult for the uninitiated to accept that a Judge’s findings would include such incredible assertions as unarmed Bengali Awami League supporters insulting or humiliating a West Pakistani soldier armed to his teeth, especially when that soldier knew that he would lose nothing by shooting down that man. However those who are familiar with the ways of Pakistan would not find this surprising. The army is such an all-powerful institution in Pakistan that it was impossible for even the Chief Justice of the country to write things against them without writing at least some things in their favour. This part, therefore, should be taken with several pinches of salt. Things like 'wholesale slaughter of West Pakistani officers and personnel' (paragraph 7 above) can only be pure imagination. It is worthy of note that nothing has been mentioned about the Hindus - nothing that could remotely serve to mitigate, even in a Pakistani judge's view, the unspeakable crime of the country's army attempting to annihilate the entire Hindu minority of East Pakistan.

(b) In the conclusion it has been acknowledged in so many words that whatever these circumstances are, they may mitigate, but do not justify " retaliation by a disciplined army against its own people ". It has further been observed that " The Pakistan Army was called upon to operate in Pakistan territory, and could not, therefore, be permitted to behave as if it was dealing with external aggression or operating on enemy soil "

(c) What is particularly important for the purposes of this book is that the attempt to eliminate or exterminate the entire Hindu minority in East Pakistan, an act comparable to Hitler's action against the Jews or Pol Pot's against city people in his own country, has been given only marginal importance. The frequency with which the subject of killing of

Hindus has been mentioned in the report should make this clear. All such mentions have been made in italics (by author), and it can be readily seen that they are very few and far between. It is as if by trying to 'eliminate' the Hindu minority, or asking (that too by a General) as to how many Hindus one had killed, or a Brigadier giving written orders to kill Hindus, only a minor misdemeanour had been committed.

No analysis had been attempted to determine officially, either in India or in Bangladesh, the proportion of Hindus among those killed. However, Shrinandan Vyas[18]

has estimated that among the refugees who fled to India following Pakistani persecution in 1971, as well as among the total number of people killed, roughly 80% were Hindus, 15% Muslims, and 5% Christians and Buddhists.

Ms. Asma Jehangir, a noted and respected human rights activist and feminist of Pakistan, visited Bangladesh in February 2001 when this author happened to be in Dacca. She spoke to a small and select audience at the Muktijuddha Jadughar (Liberation War Museum) where she openly apologised for the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army on the civilian population of East Pakistan. She said that the civilian population of West Pakistan had been kept completely in the dark about these atrocities. The speech was widely reported in the Bangladeshi media, and this author scanned all major Bangla and English newspapers of Dacca to see if there was any reference to the fact that the majority of the victims of these atrocities were Hindus - in fact to see whether at all there was any reference to Hindus in her speech. There was none.

Taslima Nasrin's great work Lojja (Shame), described in the next chapter in detail, mentions a gory distinction between the Pakistani Army's treatment of Bengali Hindus and Muslims. She mentions that the army used to nab people at random, Hindus invariably and Muslims sometimes, and try various tricks on them like kicking them with boots on, bayoneting, breaking their backbones (literally), gouging out their eyes and so on. In the end they sometimes spared the Muslims their lives, but never the Hindus.

One question survives. These demons, these Pakistani soldiers and officers, had been in the custody of the Indian Army as Prisoners of War after their surrender at Dacca in 1971. Their bestialities had received publicity the world over. Pakistan was a vanquished country, and there was no way it could have concealed the horrendous record of its army against people who were once its citizens. Why, then, did Indira Gandhi's India or Sheikh Mujib's Bangladesh not institute a Nuremberg or Serbia-type trial for the bestialities, which can easily qualify as Crimes against Humanity, committed by the Pakistan Army?

Such a trial would have had the support of the whole world. Finding witnesses to the ghastly crimes would have been very easy then. The publicity would have caused Pakistan untold embarrassment, and it would have been good for the whole of the Human race to have such acts exposed and the guilty brought to book. No such move was, however initiated, even demanded by any quarter in India, and the soldiers, held as

POWs in India, were quietly repatriated to Pakistan after the Simla Accord between Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. This is yet another enigma, and again an answer has been attempted in Chapter 10.

[1]

Hamoodur Rahman report, see below

[2]

White House Years, ibid., p. 871

[3] India Today (newsmagazine published from New Delhi), August 21, 2000 issue, p. 34. www.india-today.com

[4] Dacca Bishshobidyalaye Gonohatya : 1971, Jagannath Hall (Mass Murder in Dacca University : 1971, Jagannath Hall of Residence) (Bangla), Ratanlal Chakraborty, Ed. and Compiled 1st Ed., Aagami Prakashani, Dacca, 1993, pp. 14-20

[5] ibid. p. 135

[6] ibid. p. 126

[7] ibid. p. 60-68 [8]

Only Bengali Hindus use 'Jol', as the Bangla word for 'water'. The Muslims always say 'Pani'.

[9]

ibid. p. 60-68

[10]

'The Hindusthan Times' , New Delhi, Dec 24 1971, p. 6

[11]

Sankhari Patti means abode of the Sankharis, people who work on Sankha or Conchshells. They are all Hindus

[12]

'Crisis in South Asia - A report', by Senator Edward Kennedy to the Subcommittee investigating the Problem of Refugees and Their Settlement, Submitted to U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, November 1, 1971, U.S. Govt. Press, pp.6-7

[13]

'The Pakistani Slaughter That Nixon Ignored' , Syndicated Column by Sydney Schanberg, New York Times, May 3, 1994

[14]

'Crisis in South Asia - A report', ibid.

[15]

'Bangladesh: The Birth Of A Nation', A handbook of Background information and Documentary Sources Compiled by Univ. of Chicago Group of Scholars, by M.Nicholas, P.Oldensburg, Ed.W.Morehouse, M.Seshachalam & Co., India, 1972, p.7

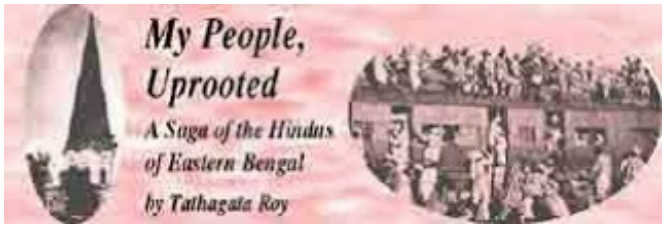
[16]

'Hindu Genocide in East Pakistan', by Shrinandan Vyas, Web Article, http://www.hvk.org/hvk/articles/0197/0026.html

[17]

Mrs. Sheikh Hasina Wajed, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, addressing the U.N. Millenium Summit, 7th September 2000, quoted in the Times of India, Mumbai Ed. 9th September 2000, p. 12

[18] Hindu Genocide in East Pakistan, ibid.



Chapter 9

BLOWING HOT AND COLD : HINDUS IN THE BANGLADESH ERA

Bangladesh got its independence through the bloody holocaust of 1971, followed by military action by the Indian Army, assisted by the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army) consisting of Bangladeshi irregulars. The bulk of the victims of the holocaust were Hindus. A common language, Bangla, which the Hindus and Muslims dearly loved, became the basis, the raison d'etre of the new country. The Prime Minister of the new Republic, Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman declared that one of the cornerstones of the new country would be religious tolerance, and the state would be secular.

After this one would have expected that the life of the Hindus who had so far not crossed over to India (and, of course, were still alive after the holocaust of 1971) would be peaceful, and they would be permitted to go about their business with the same freedom as the majority Muslims. Alas, it was not to be. While the life of the Hindus was certainly not as bad as it was under the Pakistani regime, it was very, very far from being a bed of roses. For the Hindus there were relatively good times, like the first five years of the republic, average times like the period of Awami League rule in the late nineties upto the writing of this book, and the brief rule, in 1991, of temporary President, Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. There were bad times like the period of Ziaur Rahaman's, or his widow Khaleda Zia's rule, or Ershad's rule around the time when he declared Islam to be the state religion. And there were horrible, abysmal, near-Pakistani times like the period when there was a Writ Petition filed in the Calcutta High Court against the Quran, and when the disputed structure in Ayodhya, often referred to as the Babri Mosque of Ayodhya, India, was demolished by Hindus[i]

.

But at all times, barring the initial years of euphoria, there was and is widespread ill-feeling against the Hindus, especially in the rural areas (which covers the entire country, barring the four sizeable towns of Dacca, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna). There are several reasons for this. First, the basic intolerance of the Muslim towards the infidel (this statement, incidentally, is not any expression of disrespect, but one of fact - see Chapter 10). The urban middle and upper classes of Bangladesh are, to a great extent, free of this prejudice, but the rural masses, mostly illiterate, are under the thumbs of the village Mollahs, and there is no reason for the Mollahs to love the Hindus. Even the urban middle class joined the fundamentalist crowd, and attacked Hindus without a

qualm when there was a strong enough provocation, as there was during the post-Babri days. Second, a subject discussed in Chapter 4, the irresistible appeal that Bengali Hindu women have for the Muslim male. Many Muslim men are prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to possess a Hindu woman, and that does not make Hindu men particularly dear to them. Third, the economic motive, in a religious package. Quite a few of the rural Hindus still have considerable property, and a large part of the fundamentalist rural populace see no reason why Hindus should be allowed to be so rich. Moreover, the bulk of Bengali Muslims are peasants and in them there is the hunger for land that is present in every peasant. Fourth, the popular perception that every Hindu is an Indian agent, an India sympathiser, and every Hindu is thus the obvious 'fall guy' in real or imagined Indian acts against the interests of Bangladesh, such as robbing the country of water (causing a drought) or sending too much water (causing a flood) by operation of the Farakka Barrage[ii]

.

On the flip side, it must be mentioned that unlike during the Pakistani era, there is no overt state sponsorship of the persecution, and in most cases very little covert sponsorship either. What is really present is animosity or indifference towards Hindus at the individual level of police officers and similarly placed public servants. There has been no mass exodus of Hindus as there was in the East Pakistan era since Bangladesh came into being. Although a large number of Hindus have left for India, they have taken their own time in doing so, and in many cases they have been able to dispose of their property (though often for a pittance, as happens with distress sales) before they have left. And finally, unlike the eerie silence and the secularist hypocrisy prevailing in India, there is substantial sympathy among the Bangladeshi Muslim intellectuals for the Hindus for the fate that they had suffered, and they are vocal with that sympathy. Two authors in particular - Salaam Azad, and the celebrated Dr. Taslima Nasrin - stand out in this regard. Of these, Taslima Nasrin's fearlessness had driven the fundamentalists in the country to declare a futwah for her killing, and drove her to exile in Europe. The reaction, or rather the lack of reaction, of the Left-Nehruvian political and intellectual establishment in India (the term has been explained in detail in Chapter 10 below) to the travails of Nasrin is very interesting, and will be discussed in this chapter and the next one.

So what really was or is the state of the Bengali Hindu in Muslim-majority, Bangla-speaking Bangladesh?

Versions differ, yet agree substantially on the proposition that there is constant subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle persecution, and pressure exerted on them to leave for India. Francois Gautier, an expatriate French journalist resident in India, correspondent of the Paris newspaper Figaro, and A.J.Kamra together with Koenraad Elst, have both drawn very grim pictures. According to Gautier[iii]

"It would be nice to say that the Hindus in Bangladesh are prospering. But it is the reverse which has happened. There were 28% Hindus in 1941, 10.5% in 1991, and less

than 9 % today. Pogroms, burning of temples (specially after Ayodhya) have all ensured that the Hindus flee Bangladesh".

According to Elst, as recorded in his finishing of Kamra's book, 'The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms', Bangladesh today is a vast concentration camp for Hindus. The chief tormentors of Hindus are the Jamaat-e-Islami, a fundamentalist Islamic political party and the Islami Chhatra Shibir, a similarly motivated students' organisation. However, the Bangladesh National Party of Begum Khaleda Zia is strongly anti-Hindu and rabidly anti-Indian, and does its bit in making the Hindu's lives miserable as far as it can. Even the ruling Awami League of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, currently led by his only surviving family member Mrs. Sheikh Hasina Wajed, and supposed to be sympathetic to Hindus, shows considerable ambivalence in this regard, and is said to be more interested in the Hindus' votes rather than in their welfare or their security. The government practises open discrimination in the appointment of Hindus to high posts, and harasses them in a myriad other small and big ways. Apart from these organised groups, Hindu-bashing is practised by individuals and informal groups all the time, especially in the rural areas where the lead is often provided by the village Mollah. Kamra and Elst's account cites a large number of examples of persecution of Hindus, and the more blatant among them have been stated later in this chapter.

By far the most horrific picture of the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh has been drawn by a few daring Bangladeshi Muslim authors, notably Taslima Nasrin and Salaam Azad, the first the more famous among them. Both of them have written in Bangla, though Taslima's celebrated book Lojja was translated into English under the title 'Shame'. The best picture drawn by Taslima is in her books 'Lojja' [iv]and 'Phera' [v]

(both in Bangla, meaning respectively, 'Shame' and 'The Return'). Lojja is otherwise memorable because it is the book which caused a fundamentalist outfit in Bangladesh called 'Sahaba Sainik Parishad' (with several others following suit) to demand a ban on all her writing and declare a futwah for her death. Such a futwah is roughly equivalent to putting out a contract on her, with the difference that the consideration for the contract is not money, but the satisfaction of having served one's religion well.

Apart from these Bangladeshi Muslim authors, an organisation called Nikhil Banga Nagarik Sangha (All-Bengal Citizens' Forum) run a website called www.mayerdak.com ('mayer dak' meaning, in Bangla, the call of the mother) which tries to expose and give publicity to incidents of Hindu-bashing in Bangladesh. Similarly, a group of U.S. based Hindus of Bangladeshi origin, under the banner of an organisation called Human Rights Congress for Bangladeshi Minorities, run another website called www.hrcbm.org. By far the most indifferent lot to the atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh are the Hindu Bengalis of India, especially those of West Bengal, including those of East Bengali origin, many of whom consider it 'communal' to even commiserate with their close cousins across the border (the reasons for this strange and inexplicable behavior are analysed in the next chapter). There are, however, exceptions. The weekly newsmagazine Swastika[vi]

(Bangla) regularly reports instances of atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh.

Lojja, a short novel, describes the life of a Hindu family of Mymensingh who, through what has been shown as the stubbornness of the father of the head of the family, Dr. Sukumar Datta and his son Sudhamoy Datta, had chosen to live on in East Pakistan. It was 1952, and everyone else was leaving, all the friends in Sudhamoy's class in Lytton Medical College, Dacca. They had warned Sudhamoy, while leaving, 'You will regret it if you don't go now ; this is the Muslims' homeland, there is no security for us here. Sudhamoy's father did not budge and neither did Sudhamoy. He got his medical degree, moved back to Mymensingh, got a job in the S.K. Hospital and set up a thriving private practice in Swadeshi Bazar. He had married Kironmoyee, daughter of a lawyer from Brahmanbaria who later moved to India and kept on pressing the couple to do so. The couple, however, specifically Sudhamoy, deliberately chose not to leave his home and hearth. They had a son Suranjan and a daughter, Maya. He was all along a Bangla language enthusiast, and had actively participated in all the movements that espoused the cause of the language and opposed the imposition of the Urdu language on East Pakistanis by the Westerners. In 1971, after the Pakistani Army crackdown, he got all excited and decided to go to war with the Bangladesh Mukti Bahini, the Liberation Army, and before that to leave his family in the village home of a Muslim friend.

But he had to lock his home before leaving, and for that he needed to buy a padlock. He went out into the deserted night to buy that padlock and was accosted by three Pakistani soldiers who asked him his name. He had hesitated for a second and answered 'Sirajuddin Hussain'. That hesitation caused the Pakistanis to disbelieve him, and make him strip. When they found that he was not circumcised (and therefore was obviously a Hindu) they broke one of his legs and three of his ribs by kicking him. They dragged him to their camp, hung him from a beam and beat him mercilessly, forced him to drink their urine when he cried for water, and constantly badgered him to recite the Kalma and become a Muslim. Sudhamoy was a well-read, cultured person. Even in that state he had recalled Alex Haley's ancestor Kunta Kinte being beaten and told to call himself 'Toby', and persistently refusing to do so. Sudhamoy had decided to follow Kunta Kinte. When he did not give in after six or seven days of badgering the Pakistani soldiers chopped off his penis (they called it an act of advanced circumcision) and threw him in a gutter. There were a few other Hindus in the camp who were begging to be made Muslims in order to be allowed to live. The Pakistanis had killed them.

Sudhamoy somehow survived the ordeal, dragged himself home and collapsed. Kironmoyee managed to smuggle him and the children away to Arjunkhil village in Phulpur, across the Brahmaputra river. There Sudhamoy changed his name to Abdus Salam, Kironmoyee's to Fatima, Suranjan's to Sabir. When the Mukti Bahini came to Phulpur and announced the formation of independent Bangladesh, he had howled in joy, and hugged his wife, calling her Kironmoyee again, over and over. But he could never forget that he had condemned Kironmoyee to a lifetime of forced celibacy. And for a middle-class, middle-aged Bengali Hindu housewife like Kironmoyee to consider divorce, or seek sex outside wedlock was beyond her dreams.

Sudhamoy was full of hope that with the transformation of the country into Bangladesh he would be able to hold his head high, and live on in Bangladesh as a Hindu, but a patriotic Hindu. It did seem that way for a while. However, things changed with the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his entire family in 1975. The fundamentalists began to reassert themselves. General Ziaur Rahman captured power, and appointed Shah Aziz, a Razakar (one of the groups which collaborated with the Pakistanis during the liberation struggle of 1971) as his next man. Then it was the turn of General Ershad to capture power. He formed his Jatiyo Party, and in 1989 declared Islam to be the State Religion. And that made all the difference.

But Sudhamoy persisted in his wishful thinking. He still stubbornly pretended to himself that he was in no danger, that he was an equal citizen, a proud citizen of Bangladesh, despite being a Hindu. However, things began to happen in front of his very eyes that he could not ignore. He found his friends, Muslim friends, Marxist friends of the liberation struggle days, gradually turning into devout Muslims. On some days, when Sudhamoy dropped in on them, they were distinctly uncomfortable – they had a Millad at home! Suranjan and Maya, Sudhamoy's son and daughter, were discriminated against in school in many strange ways designed to put it in their minds that this was not their country, that they were not welcome to stay on here, that they were Hindus, that they'd better go away to India. It hurt their sensitive child-minds, and Suranjan became a maladjusted child. It was becoming dangerous to proclaim oneself to be a Hindu, and Kironmoyee gave up wearing the signs of Hindu married women, the conch-shell bangle on her wrist and the vermilion 'fortune mark' in the parting of her hair.

Still Sudhamoy could not shake off his beliefs, and became a split personality. He yelled at his Hindu friends and called them unpatriotic when they talked of buying property in India with a view to go away there ; and he complained to his Muslim friends of the abject discrimination practised against him because he was a Hindu. Both groups began to avoid him. Eventually he could no longer stand the insecurity in the small town of Mymensingh, and yet could not bring himself to move to India. So he moved to Dacca and took up a job as an Assistant Professor of Medicine. Even here he was passed over for promotions in favour of his junior Muslim colleagues. Yet he persisted in his wishful thinking that Bangladesh was his country, that he was an equal citizen of Bangladesh.

His son Suranjan had grown up to be a social misfit as a result of the tumultuous life that he had gone through. He had good Muslim friends in Dacca, enlightened, irreligious friends who truly loved him, and yet he felt that all their love for him was pointless, because they were powerless against the Islamic fundamentalism that was gradually engulfing the whole country. The enormous insecurity that he suffered following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India sickened him. He watched a procession chanting a slogan 'Ekta duita Hindu dhoro, sokal bikal nasta koro' (catch a Hindu or two, have them for breakfast or tea) ; another one chanted 'Hindu jodi banchte chao, edesh chhere chole jao' (Hindus, if you want to live, leave this country).

Suranjan left home and wandered about aimlessly. He did it for quite a few times. All his

friends told him not to stir out of home. During one of his absences his father suffered a cerebral stroke and was practically immobilised. And during another absence some Muslim goons managed to get entry into their home, ravaged it, and in the end dragged out and carried away Maya. Her mother Kironmoyee ran after her, appealed to some Muslims standing by to do something. Nobody did anything. Suranjan came home, went out with his friend Hydar, searched high and low all over Dacca. No trace of Maya. In impotent rage Suranjan goes to a young Muslim sex worker, has a bout of uncharacteristically violent and sadistic sex with her and refuses to pay her after the act, as if to teach Muslims a lesson. But he eventually relents, and pays up for the services rendered.

One of Suranjan's best friends, Belal, a Muslim, one day asks him "Why did you break our Babri Masjid down"? Suranjan wonders why and how the Babri Masjid, a shrine in India, is 'our' for Belal, a Bangladeshi Muslim, and how Suranjan, a patriotic Bangladeshi Hindu, is part of 'you', the Indian Hindu crowd who broke it! Is this what is meant by Bangla nationalism? Does it not extend beyond pan-Islamism?

Maya is not found. Somebody brings news that a corpse looking like Maya has been seen floating about below a bridge. The book ends with a scene of both Sudhamoy's and Suranjan's dreams of living in Bangladesh as Hindus getting shattered. They finally accept reality, and decide to move to India.

Phera, as a novel, is even shorter than Lojja. It describes the experiences of Kalyani, a Hindu woman who grew up in Mymensingh town, East Bengal, and moved to West Bengal like millions of others. Yet, unlike those millions she cannot forget Mymensingh, the Brahmaputra River, her huge house, memories of her father, her childhood friend Sharifa, her Bidyamoyee School. She talks about them all the time. Her loving husband tries to be nice but is really uninterested. Driven by intense nostalgia she decides to visit Mymensingh again, and takes along her son Dipon with her.

The trip turns out to be a huge disillusionment. The people are indifferent, lukewarm, sometimes downright hostile. Most of them have forgotten that a huge Hindu population used to live there (most major towns of East Bengal, including Mymensingh, had a Hindu majority in the British days). Nobody remembers her father, a retired District Magistrate, and a prominent citizen of the town. She goes to look up Sharifa, and finds her a wreck, the mother of seven children, while Kalyani is still quite youthful and attractive. Atahar, Sharifa's husband, is not particularly welcoming, but that does not stop him from looking at Kalyani with lustful eyes. He also makes a snide remark about how Muslims are ill-treated in India. Dipon tries to play with some local boys, and finds they are killing red ants, because red ants are supposedly Hindu, and sparing black ants because they are Muslim.

Kalyani finally goes looking for her own home, and finds it is not there. It had possibly been taken over by the Pakistan government under the draconian Enemy Property Laws, pulled down, parceled out into small plots, and built all over. She still goes on to what had been once their property, like a person possessed, and finds a Jam (Jamun) tree that

she knew very well, the only remnant of her lost childhood. She is now completely overtaken by uncontrollable nostalgia. She hugs the Jam tree and kneels down to smell the earth, breaks down and howls in agony. A small crowd collects and discusses her. Somebody says she is Hindu, from India, and this used to be her home. Some unkind soul makes a snap judgement about Hindus wanting to have the best of both worlds. Finally a gentle old Muslim comforts her. As she is leaving the scene, someone shouts after her 'Kalyani didi' (Hindu Bengali word for 'elder sister', Muslims say 'Apa') ! Kalyani turns and finds Swapan, brother of Rukhsana, another childhood Muslim friend of hers. This is a different kind of person from what she had been seeing so long. He shares Kalyani's nostalgia, commiserates with her, and rues the Islamic fundamentalism that is gaining ground in Bangladesh. Kalyani in a conversation with him, wonders whether someday the two countries might not reunite. Swapan is not very hopeful - he says religion poses an insurmountable barrier. Kalyani eventually cuts short her holiday and comes back to Calcutta.

Though both Lojja and Phera are works of fiction, they have had a signal effect in drawing the attention of the world to the persecution of Hindus of East Bengal, something that even the victims had deliberately chose to forget. Of the two Phera is a typical Bangla sentimental family novel, heavy with nostalgia, heartbreaks, disillusionments, dashed hopes and the like. However it is more readable than Lojja for the lay reader, because of the human interest. Lojja, on the other hand, is all gloom right through, very heavy reading, and not at all attractive to a reader not particularly interested in the backdrop. Neither is anything great in terms of literary quality. Yet, these two books have done - or undone - more than any learned treatise or political speech to break the cloud so carefully created and nurtured by the Indian Left-Nehruvian intellectual establishment, and by Bangladesh, to conceal the entire gamut of anti-Hindu acts in Eastern Bengal, ranging from plain discrimination all the way to the bestialities of 1971.

The strength of Lojja lies in its background research, the statistics it quotes, its analysis of the statistics and the conclusions Taslima draws from the analysis. Consider the following : she cites as many as 145 instances of persecution of Hindus in present-day Bangladesh, taking care to mention the precise location where the act was perpetrated, in terms of Zilla, Upazilla and Gram (respectively district, sub-district and village). These are mostly instances of small-scale, localised persecution, quite apart from the type of countrywide atrocities that took place in October 1990 and again in December 1992.

Consider some of the typical cases mentioned in Lojja, covering both local and countrywide types of persecution. :

During the pogrom of October 1990 there were widespread destruction of Hindu property and temples and other religious structures in Dacca city. The famous Dhakeswari temple was burnt down, with the police idly watching. The raiders burnt the main temple, natmandir, Shiva temple, the guest house, the residence of Sridam Ghosh next to the guest house. At Gaudiya Math too, they destroyed the main temple,

natmandir, and guest house. At Madhva Gaudiya Math the main temple was destroyed. The Jaykali temple was reduced to rubble. The main room and the beautifully sculpted throne of the deity in the Ram-Sita temple were destroyed. The Banagram temple, the math at Nayabazar, a room inside the Brahmo Samaj were all destroyed. Seven shops belonging to Hindus at the entry to Shankhari Bazar (the abode of the conch-shell artists), namely Shila Bitan, Soma Traders, Mita Marble, Saha cabin, a barbershop, a tyre shop and a laundry were vandalized, looted, and then burnt down[vii]

.

Following President Ershad's declaration of Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh in 1989, about four hundred Muslims surrounded the houses of people of the Rishi community (a backward Hindu sect) in village Sabahan, upazilla Daudkandi, zilla Comilla, and told them "from now on our state religion is Islam. If you want to live in this country you will have to embrace Islam, or else you will have to leave. When the Rishis refused to convert the Muslims looted and set fire to their houses, broke down their temple, and raped all nubile women. Many were kidnapped and never found again[viii]

.

Again, following Ershad's declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1989, some Muslims in village Siddhirpasha, upazilla Abhoy Nagar, zilla Jessore, had started spreading rumours that Hindus will not henceforth be allowed to sell property. This had caused a lot of Hindus to sell off their property at throwaway prices. Madhab Nandy, an influential Hindu, tried to persuade the people not to be swayed by such rumours and not to sell their property. A few days later a large Muslim mob raided Madhab Nandy's house and raped his daughter as well as his daughter-in-law, the latter seven months pregnant[ix]

.

The book is replete with such episodes of ghastly atrocities committed against Hindus across the length and breadth of Bangladesh. Usurping of property, kidnapping, destruction of temples and of course rape, are the recurring themes.

She also quotes profuse statistics about the decimation of the Hindu population in Bangladesh, and their abysmally low representation in the government, quite out of proportion with their numbers. Again, consider the following :

"In 1901 the percentage of Hindus in East Bengal was 33.0 (census in the South Asian subcontinent is carried out every ten years, one year after the decadal year). In 1911 this had come down to 31.5, in 1921 to 30.6, in 1931 to 29.4, in 1941 to 28. Thus, during the first four decades of the century the percentage had reduced by five. But after partition, in the first ten years, a single decade, the percentage fell by six, from 28 to 22. In 1961 the figure stood at 18.5. After the liberation of Bangladesh the reduction in the Hindu population had come down to pre-partition levels, and it could be said that Hindus were fleeing the country in smaller numbers. Thus the percentage of Hindus in 1974 was 13.5 and in 1981, 12.1. But would these figures remain where they are? Would they not

accelerate after 1989, 1990, 1992 ?"[x] (1989 was the year of President Ershad's declaration of Islam to be the state religion of Bangladesh, 1990 saw a lot of pogroms in the country, and 1992, of course, was the year of demolition of the Indian shrine called the Babri Mosque. In 1991 Hindus were determined to constitute 10.5% of the population of Bangladesh[xi]

.).

In respect of lack of representation of Hindus among the higher echelons of the country's bureaucracy, she points an unwavering finger at something that in today's management parlance is known as a 'glass ceiling'. There is no official bar to Hindus rising to high posts, and yet they never manage to rise. There are no Hindu Secretaries or Additional Secretaries in the Bangladesh secretariat, only three Joint Secretaries, and a handful of Deputy Secretaries[xii]. There are only six Deputy Commissioners in the country, only one judge in the High Court, very few Superintendents of Police. Sudhamoy was quite sure that he could not rise to the chair of Associate Professor because he was Sudhamoy Datta, and not Salimullah Chaudhuri or Mohammed Ali. Among the observations she makes in Lojja, one is very interesting : "Hindus seem to have the hide of a rhinoceros[xiii]

"

Salaam Azad has not earned half the fame (or notoriety, depending on the point of view), but his classic 'Hindu Sampraday Keno Deshtyag Korchhe' (Why the Hindus are fleeing this country) is an incredibly bold book, and a storehouse of information on the myriad ways and the myriad villages in which the Hindus are persecuted by the majority Muslims all over Bangladesh. More than being an incredibly bold book, it is also an incredible book in its degree of detail, containing vivid descriptions of more than five hundred cases of persecution of Hindus, some of them involving gross misuse of state power, and a large number of them exhibiting two traits that have been referred to earlier: the land-hunger of the Muslims and terrible yearning of Bengali Muslim men to possess a Hindu woman.

In his introduction to the book Azad writes : "There has never been a communal riot in Bangladesh . . . . A riot necessarily implies use of some force on either side - there has been no such thing here . . . . Here the defenceless Hindus have been mercilessly persecuted by the fundamentalists among the Muslims. In the backdrop of Bangladesh these cannot be called communal riots by any standards. The proper name for them is communal attacks or communal persecution. They are taking place every day in Bangladesh. The ones described in this book relate to the period between 1989 and 1997. Thousands of such instances will never come to the notice of the world, because they have not been recorded or the records have not been preserved. The ones described in this book are collected from journals and newspapers, and from workers of non-governmental organisations working among the victims. I have tried to visit some of the locations in order to check the correctness of the reports. Wherever I have done so, I have been struck by the enormity of the crime, I have been shaken to my roots".

Consider the following from Azad's book:

In April 1995, Tulsirani, a Hindu girl studying in the fifth class, of village Harpara, police station Srinagar, district Munshigunge, was forcibly taken away from her parents by a few Muslim men. Tulsi's parents begged the villagers to do something to get their daughter back, also adding that they did not want any action against the guilty men. But the villagers did nothing. Finally her parents had to file a complaint with the local police station, but even here they were afraid to mention the name of the guilty though they knew their names very well. The police, after a lot of string-pulling, managed to get Tulsi back. Meanwhile the guilty men are strutting about openly in the village, and threatening Tulsi's father with dire consequences unless they withdrew their case. Tulsi's family has left the village and gone into hiding. This incident has pushed the morale of the Hindus of Bangladesh to an all-time low[xiv]

.

On February 8, 1994, armed Muslim hooligans raided the house of Rampada Rishi in village Chandanpur, police station Singair, district Manikgunge. Rampada's brother had just come back from abroad, and had a lot of goodies worth about Taka 100,000, all of which the hooligans took away. They also pulled out Rampada's wife Rani upon threat of death, and gang-raped her in a nearby field. A member of the same gang also raped Rupi, daughter of Ratneswar Rishi of the same village. Rupi became pregnant and gave birth to a son, whom she named Saddam. Rupi claimed that the father of the child was Habibur Rahman Habi, but no action was taken against Habi[xv]

Dr. Dulal Chandra Biswas is a Hindu doctor in the village of Kulipara, Babukhali union, police station Mohammedpur, district Magura. Sharif Shahjahan, the officer-in-charge of the Mohammedpur police station, and Mafizul Islam Kajal, an under-officer, one day raided the house of Dr. Biswas and mercilessly beat up Dr. Biswas's second son Dipak, and molested his wife Sabitarani, Dipak's wife Belarani and his minor daughter. Dr. Biswas was not home when this had started. When he came home he saw his son Dipak hanging from a tree while the police officers were beating him. He begged the police officers to spare his family members. The policemen then beat him up and took him and his son to the police station, and made him pay a bribe of Ten thousand Takas. Next day they released him on bail, but sent his son to court on a false charge. Sharif had repeated this act with a number of Hindus in order to extort money from them[xvi]

.

On August 9, 1996, Minati Rani, a Hindu married woman of 22, was returning home late at night to her village of Kondolbalia, union Kalia, police station Phulpur, district Mymensingh, from her parents house in the nearby village of Naogaon. Usually Hindu women do not stir out of home so late at night, but she had heard that her husband had fallen ill, and she was very anxious to get back home. At about 11 P.M. at Phulpur bus stand she was accosted by three police constables called Inzil Mian, Rafiqul Islam and Abdus Sattar. They took her to the police station and raped her repeatedly through the

night.[xvii]

Shri Gouranga Mahaprabhu, a major Hindu religious preacher and reformer of Bengal, of the Vaishnavite school of Hindus of the middle ages, is venerated today, among others by the International Society of Krsna-consciousness (ISKCON, popularly known as the Hare Krishna cult) who have spread his name all over the world. His family came originally from the village of Dhaka-Dakshin in the district of greater Sylhet. The village of Bhunbirer Sasan, police station Srimangal, district Moulvi Bazar has a temple dedicated to him over debuttar property measuring 14.19 acres. Anil Chandra Pal has been serving as shebait of this property for a long time. Lately some Muslims led by one Bashir Ahmed have forcibly harvested the paddy from the property and have also threatened to kill Pal.[xviii]

One of the most gruesome killings of Hindus took place at village Nidarabad, Harashpur union, police station and district Brahmanbaria. Some Muslims were after the land of one Shashanka Debnath of the Jugi community (a backward Hindu community) of the village. When they failed to persuade Shashanka to part with his land for a pittance and go way to India, Tajul Islam, Nazrul Islam, Habibur Rahman, Azizur Rahman and a few others called him out on the night of October 16, 1987, and killed him. Then this Tajul Islam claimed, on the strength of a forged deed, that he, along with one Maulvi Ibrahim, had bought the land from Shashanka. Still Shashanka's widow Birajabala refused to oblige the Muslims, and made a police complaint for the murder of Shashanka as well as for forgery of land deed. Meanwhile Maulvi Ibrahim swore an affidavit in the court that he had not purchased any land from Shashanka. Then on the night of March 5, 1988 Tajul, together with a few others broke into Birajabala's house and kidnapped her, her sons Subhas (13), Suman (7) and Sujan (3), and her daughters Minatibala (17) and Pranati (11), trussed them up, loaded them on to a boat, took them to Dhopabari canal some two kilometres away from the village, and killed all of them. The murderers then cut up the cadavers into small pieces, put the pieces in drums with a lot of lime, and buried the drums in the bed of the canal[xix]

.

After the destruction of the disputed structure, often called the Babri Mosque, in India on December 6, 1992, the Islamic fundamentalists had mounted a concerted attack on the Hindus of the country who had not the remotest connection with the Indian structure or its demolition. This is the subject of Taslima Nasrin's famous book Lojja, described above. There had been as many as 28,000 cases of attacks on Hindu property in Bangladesh. Of these some 9,500 dwellings or buildings have been totally demolished. 2,700 commercial establishments have been looted and destroyed. The breaking down of this one disused mosque in India has been sought to be avenged by the total or substantial destruction of as many as 3,600 Hindu temples or places of worship. The number of Hindus killed and injured stands at 12 and 2,000 respectively. 2,600 Hindu women have been raped. The total value of property destroyed is estimated at Takas 2,000,000,000 (there are approximately 60 Takas to the U.S. Dollar as in February 2001).

No significant action was taken by the government for rehabilitation of the injured and the dispossessed. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who had come forward to help the Hindus were not given any assistance, and in many cases were refused permission. Thousands of Hindus had been rendered homeless, and had to spend their days and nights in the open in the biting cold. Thousands of Hindu women had been rendered speechless by the trauma of being raped, sometimes gang-raped. Businessmen have been robbed of their assets, Hindu purohits and Buddhist bhikshus (priests) have been subjected to insult and torture. The government could easily have interfered and brought down the casualties to a very significant extent. Instead, the government did nothing at all. In certain cases government functionaries directly or indirectly encouraged the assailants[xx]

.

On Friday October 6 2000, while the annual Durga Puja festivities were on, Muslims from Gazipur Jama Masjid, after the Juma namaz, attacked the main Puja premises of the Hindu Kali Temple. The attackers destroyed the Puja shamiana gate, loudspeakers, ornaments and idols. They also desecrated the clothes and puja prasad (offerings) and completely disrobed the images. The attackers came armed with axes, knives, swords and sticks. They also looted nearby shops owned by local Hindus. The Muslim fundamentalists who carried out the attack claimed that the Puja loudspeakers disturbed their namaz. However, questions were raised about the collection of weapons at such short notice. Hindu leaders claimed that the attack was premeditated. Eyewitnesses recollected that around 1:45 pm at the main Jama masjid, soon after the Juma prayer some Muslims shouted 'Narae Takbeer, Allahu Akbar' and attacked the Hindu Kali Temple 150 yards away. Some broke the Lakshmi, Ramakrishna and Durga idols. Stones were pelted on all devotees. In this attack Khirbala Saha, Tulu, Subhash and seven others, including the priests were injured. In panic the women and children started crying and running. Just behind the Kali Temple is the police station. In spite of the tremendous din, the police did not come to the rescue of the Hindus. After 45 minutes, around 2:30 pm, the attackers calmed down.

Some leaders of the Hindu organizations have claimed that the incident was pre-planned. The attack by Muslims with knives and axes proves that the attack was premeditated. They also stated that during the construction of the main Puja gate, some local businessmen had obstructed them. This incident has created disharmony in the community. Hindu leaders have provided names of 20 attackers including Hatem, Lalu, Badshah, Mujibur, Najrul and Mohammed Ali. In protest of this act of violence against minority Hindus, Gazipur Puja Committee requested for the cancellation all Durga Pujas in the district. Mr. Ajit Kumar Chowdhury head of the Committee said that if the idol is desecrated then the Puja cannot continue.

After the attack, Mr. Farukh Ahmad Chowdhury Police Superintendent and Mr. A.K.M. Mozammel Haque, Municipal Chairman visited the ransacked site. In a statement, Gazipur District Commissioner Mr. Samsul Haque said that he would initiate a Commission of two persons to investigate the incident[xxi]

.

An ex-Assistant Judge of the Bangladesh Judiciary, who resigned and came away to India, and who would like his name to be withheld, narrated to this author a conversation with a Muslim judge called Abdul Matin, of Agailchhara, Gournadi, Barisal. Matin was addressing an informal gathering of Judges in which this Hindu Judge was also present. Matin said that the Law created by Christians (the basic framework of Bangladeshi Law was enacted by the British long before partition, and Bangladesh has adopted this framework, as has India) should never be allowed to come in the way of favouring a Momin (believer) over a Kafer (non-believer). He said that if one followed this principle, and did not set foot into the trap laid by those hateful Christians, one would be called straight into heaven on the day of Judgement.

From this it would have been easy to conclude that all hope for the Hindus is lost. It is however not as simple as that. The picture has another side - in fact, a bright side, and this account would be incomplete without a report on what is happening in present-day Bangladesh, as this author found out during his two trips to the country, once in 1989, and the next time in 2001.

First, a deep chasm has grown between, on the one hand, the fundamentalists, stretching from the village Mollah with his madarsah (religious school) students to the Moulanas of national standing ; and, on the other hand, the educated urban middle class (including, but not limited to, the small, very rich, Banani-Baridhara-Gulshan[xxii] crowd). The author did not get a chance to interview any of the Mollah class (it is doubtful if any of them would have agreed to be interviewed), but spoke to a number of the urbanites. The latter now openly make fun of the former, calling them tupi-dari-wallahs (the cap-and-beard-wearers). This is unknown in India where, for the 'secular' crowd of intellectuals, Muslim fundamentalists are as sacred as the holy cow. Knowing fully well that this author is an Indian and Hindu, Shah Jalal, an intelligent young man, an ordinary employee in the thriving hospitality business of Dacca, told him that what the Mollahs were doing in the countryside was unspeakable. For example, if a boy and a girl (both Muslim) were found to be so much as seeing each other frequently against the wishes of their parents, very often the Mollah would issue a futwah (edict) that this activity was la-jayez (not permitted by Islam), and they ought to be punished. The punishment might take the form of burying both of them to their waists in the ground and horsewhipping them. The muscle power would be provided by the madarsah students, and the villagers would generally watch helplessly, even participate unwillingly in the whipping process, for fear of inviting the mollah’s wrath in the village, and divine wrath in the hereafter. A scene very close to this has been painted in a short story by Imdadul Haq Milan, a very popular contemporary writer. In the story a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy fall in love, are found out, and the village Mollah sentences both of them to heavy fines. The Hindu boy's father somehow manages to pay up, but the Muslim girl's father cannot, and the girl is subjected to the sort of punishment Shah Jalal spoke about. In the end the girl commits suicide by swallowing a bottle of pesticide[xxiii]

.

Lately two Judges of the High Court, the Hon'ble Mr. Justice Ghulam Rabbani and Hon'ble Mrs. Justice Najmun Ara Sultana had ruled in a public interest litigation that issuing futwahs was illegal, and the mollahs were up in arms against them. They had declared the judges (both Muslims) to be Murtad (apostate) for whom the Islamic scriptures had prescribed the mandatory penalty of death (though there was some disagreement among clerics as to the manner of meting out the death penalty). A police constable on duty, one Badshah Mian, had been dragged inside a mosque in Brahmanbaria and mercilessly beaten to death by madarsah students in the presence of two religious leaders, Moulana Fazlul Haque Amini, and Shaikhul Haadis Azizul Haque who, together with other clerics, had been making rabid speeches all day.

A successful businessman of Dacca, who shall be called Iftikhar (he would prefer not to be named), said that the current anger of the mollah community resulting in the spate of Hartals, went far deeper than the futwah judgement. One issue that was not permitting the mollahs to sleep well nights was the empowerment of women. This had begun with the famous Bangladeshi economist Mohammed Yunus's projects of micro-credit which had become enormously successful, and had placed some money in the hands of the rural Muslim women who so far were being treated as little more than chattels. This was followed by the work of various internationally funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who were devising newer and newer methods of empowering women every day. For example, there was a project of arboriculture along the highways. An NGO had planted trees along one of the highways and had engaged rural woman to water them at an wage of Takas 200 (less than four U.S. Dollars) per month, with the further proviso that the women's jobs would last only so long as the trees stayed alive. Even this was enough for the women to declare their independence. The NGOs often preferred to engage women rather than men, because their experience was that men, armed with the money, would either spend it on hooch, or take on yet another wife.

According to Iftikhar, this empowerment of women has completely discomfited the Mollahs and the fundamentalists who drew support from them. Their entire power structure was based on the inviolable dicta contained in the Quran and Haadis, and of the traditions of lawgivers like Abu Hanifa. These dicta included the provisions that women shall be heard but not seen, that men were entitled to take four wives, and to divorce any or all of them at will, that women were like land that men were entitled to till. The fact of rural Bangladeshi Muslim women coming by the equivalent of less than four - four - U.S.Dollars every month, all by themselves, had been perceived as the beginning of the end of this edifice. The mollahs were therefore crying foul, which in their language reads 'Islam in danger'. And when Islam is in danger you do not sit quietly if you are a momin (true believer). You try to resist the onslaught, you wage Jihad, you take on, with bared swords, the enemies of Islam like the NGOs, the Awami League government, and of course the unseen hand of Hindu India. The mollahs were trying to exhort the people to do just that. Strangely enough, in Iftikhar 's view, the people were not responding. Thus, a silent revolution was taking place throughout the country. And this was possible

because the people of Bangladesh, while being God-fearing (dharmabheeru), were not blinded by religion (dharmandha). These words were not Iftikhar's alone, but were also said by M.R.Akhtar Mukul and many others, including the media.

Further, according to Iftikhar, Islam in Bangladesh was not like the Islam of Pakistan. It was a much more tolerant Islam, it was a softer, more genteel Islam, much closer to the religion as practised in Malaysia and Indonesia. According to M.R.Akhtar Mukul, this was so because the Bengalis got their Islam from the Sufis, not from the Wahabis.

Was it really as good as that? That is highly doubtful, although there is certainly some truth in what Iftikhar and M.R.Akhtar Mukul said. If it were as good as that there would have been no Noakhali, no Meghna Bridge, Madhabpasha, no Muladi, none of the things that Taslima and Salaam Azad write about. But, perhaps one could say with caution that there is hope yet for the Hindus in Bangladesh. This is primarily because the cultured, intelligent Bangladeshi gentleman of today is forever torn between whether to be a good Bengali or a good Muslim. In the former incarnation he is closer to the Bengali Hindu than any other set of people, in the latter he is a pan-Islamist. And because his attachment to the language, just like his West Bengali counterpart, is so strong as to border on the fierce, there is hope yet for the Hindu. But how do people like Iftikhar, Shah Jalal, M.R.Akhtar Mukul, intelligent, perceptive, informed people explain Noakhali, Muladi and Madhabpasha? This aspect has been explained in the next chapter.

Secondly this author found that compared to 1989, Hindus, at least in Dacca, seemed a lot more confident. 1989 was a time when President Ershad had declared Islam to be the state religion, and the morale of the Hindus was at an all-time low (barring the post-Babri days). But in the spring of 2001 the Hindus in Dacca seemed to have gained some of their buoyancy. Hindu married women were openly moving around with their 'fortune marks' of vermillion on the parting of the hair and conch-shell bangles on their wrists - not just in Dacca, but also in the distant suburb of Sabhar, the location of the national martyrs' monument . There was a sizable crowd at the Ramakrishna Mission at Tikatuli in Dacca, the reading room was full of young readers, devotional songs were being sung to the accompaniment of instruments, construction of a new building was under way. The author met Swami Gyanprakasananda (also known as Mintu Maharaj), a monk of the Ramakrishna order, and the Secretary of the Mission. Quite a few people, including some from India, had come to meet the monk. This author tried to quiz some of the Bangladeshi Hindus on how secure they felt. Whether from a genuine feeling of security, or from a natural wariness against opening up to a total stranger from India (and perhaps being overheard), they said they were 'quite all right'. Swami Gyanprakasananda was not at all forthcoming on this question.

The urban elite are quite neutral about the Hindus - talking to them one does not get an impression that they make any distinction between the two sets of people. This author also gathered that Muslims generally consider Hindus trustworthy in money matters and have particular faith in them as professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. However the

attitude of this elite towards India is another matter. A very large number among them, including well-informed upper middle class people, consider India to be the exploiter of Bangladesh, responsible for most of its ills, from flood to drought to overpopulation.

Therefore, we get back to the question : what really was or is the state of the Bengali Hindu in Muslim-majority, Bangla-speaking Bangladesh?

Looking at the totality of the country and its thirty years of life, it is obviously somewhere between what Taslima, Salaam Azad and others have described, and what people like Iftikhar would like it to be. The Hindu is certainly not half as secure in some remote village in Bhola or Gaibandha as he is in the metros of Dacca or Chittagong. Nor was he as secure in 1992 as he was in 1972. Given the choice, the Hindu would like to stay on - it is not like the Pakistani times. Then it was not a question of whether, but of when and how, about moving to India. More often than not, especially for the urban Hindu, it could be said with caution that that choice is available in present-day Bangladesh

Another aspect ought to be mentioned. The intellectuals of Bangladesh - most of them Muslims - are far more forthright in dealing with the matter of Hindu-Muslim animosities than their West Bengali counterparts. And even among the West Bengalis whatever little has been written about the question - aside from organisations like Mayerdak and Swastika mentioned earlier - has been written by two Muslim authors, Nazrul Islam (not the famous poet) and Hossainur Rahaman, and to a lesser extent by a Muslim woman author, Nargis Sattar. Of these Nazrul Islam is a senior serving police officer of the Indian Police Service, rather exceptionally academically inclined, Hossainur Rahaman is a retired Professor of History, a person of considerable erudition, and a regular contributor to journals and Nargis Sattar is a college teacher. All have authored several books on the subject (a list is given in the bibliography). The Hindu historians, sociologists and allied intellectuals of West Bengal, barring the few mentioned above, have, on the other hand, pretended that there is nothing to write about, the two communities have always lived like brothers from time immemorial.

Of the Muslim writers, Nazrul Islam is guilty of the same wrong as Abul Mansur Ahmad, namely glossing over Muslim atrocities in Eastern Bengal. His seminal work, 'Banglay Hindu Musalman Somporko' (Hindu-Muslim Relations in Bengal), is a fairly well-researched book. In the chapter on the post-partition era he smoothly jumps from 1948 to 1952, without making any mention of the bestialities of 1950[xxiv]. In the previous chapter he chronicles the events that preceded partition, and roundly abuses those among the Hindu leaders who had successfully opposed United Sovereign Bengal, but completely forgets about the Noakhali Carnage and mentions the Great Calcutta Killings only in passing[xxv]

. In his entire treatment of the subject he chooses to be completely oblivious of the fact that Hindus could not have lived with even a minimal degree of security in Muslim majority United Sovereign Bengal, that they actually could not so live in Muslim-majority Eastern Bengal. Still it must be said that his effort is laudable, because his objective is to restore amity between the communities.

Hossainur Rahaman is a lot more dispassionate and equitable in his analysis. In his Bharat-Bangladesh 2000 he quotes a Hindu intellectual of Bangladesh (whom he prefers not to name) regretting the fundamentalism in the countryside, and expressing the apprehension that the pan-Bengali secular culture of urban Bangladesh will never be able to subdue it. He mentions that a symbiotic Hindu-Muslim culture that was in evidence even in the sixties is completely gone today[xxvi]

. Yet, even he forgets to mention the pogrom of 1950, and the exodus of eight million Hindus from the land mass that is now Bangladesh.

Nargis Sattar is basically a symbiotist, a mild feminist writer. In her collection of articles in the book titled Bhai Bhai Thain Thain (Brothers must stay apart) she criticises the prejudices that exist in Muslim society in West Bengal, and rues the fact that these prejudices are keeping them away from the majority Hindus[xxvii]

. She, just like Nazrul Islam takes no cognizance of the fact that Hindu-Muslim relations in West Bengal cannot be seen in isolation from that in Bangladesh, and that cannot be analysed without coming face to face with the Hindu exodus.

Despite the apprehensions of the Bangladeshi Hindu intellectual mentioned in Hossainur Rahaman's book, and despite all the atrocities reported, so long as there are people like Taslima Nasrin, Shahriyar Kabir and Salaam Azad in Bangladesh, there is hope yet for Hindus in Bangladesh. Yet, one headache does not go away. The Hindu stays perpetually worried if he has a nubile daughter, doubly so if the daughter is reasonably good-looking. He stops worrying only after she has moved to India and is settled there.

There is a strange corollary to this story of Hindus in present-day Bangladesh. And that is that, for the beleaguered Hindu, Bangladesh does not stop at the Radcliffe line. It extends far beyond this line, well into the eastern parts of Muslim-majority (64% Muslim) Murshidabad district, and parts of North 24-Parganas and South 24-Parganas districts. Consider the following :

The silent persecution of Hindus in Hindu-majority West Bengal has been carefully hidden from the rest of the state and the country by the Marxist government in saddle for the last twenty-four years (they have just got a fresh lease of life in the 2001 elections). This persecution takes place in the Muslim majority areas contiguous to Bangladesh in the District of Murshidabad, and is at its most virulent in the regions of Hariharpara, Domkal, Raninagar, Sagarpara, Sheikhpara, Beldanga, Naoda, Bhagabangola, and Jalangi - in fact all over the part of the district which lies to the east of the Bhagirathi River, with the exception of Berhampur Town. Just one feature of the insecurity from which the Hindus of this region suffer may be mentioned. Very few - practically none - of the Hindus in the region will keep their daughters or sisters at home after they have turned, say, eleven. They are all sent away to live with relatives or in a hostel, in Berhampur (the district headquarters), or somewhere to the west of the Bhagirathi River, or if their parents can afford it, to Calcutta. Blowing of conch-shells or beating of dhaks during Hindu religious rituals are severely frowned upon, and seldom

practised[xxviii]

.

Side by side with this strange case of persecution of Hindus in Hindu-majority India, infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims continues unabated through the porous border which is populated on both sides by Muslims and an infiltrator looks, talks and worships no different from a native. According to Amalendra Nath Upadhyaya who was interviewed in this connection, most of the insecurity, though not all, is created by people from across the border. Actually the extent of infiltration in this area is so stupendous that after a while certain areas have come to be populated by infiltrators alone. The so-called secular politicians are so blasé about the whole business, that the late Indrajit Gupta of the Communist Party of India, a Bengali Hindu, while he was the Home Minister of India in the short-lived Central Cabinet headed by Inder Kumar Gujral, once said "Infiltration, what infiltration? Infiltration takes place only in Assam. Here both sides of the border are populated by Bengalis, people come and go all the time". This can be taken as the official stamp of approval by no less than the Home Minister of India to the illicit crossing of an International Border.

And infiltration is only one of the crimes committed in the area. The volume of smuggling - practically all from India to Bangladesh - is mind-boggling. Among the articles smuggled out are coal, kerosene, cheap wearing apparel, salt, sugar and cattle. Muslim robber gangs, mostly consisting of Bangladeshis, and known locally as 'musket-bahini (force)' because of the cheap countrymade guns that they use. Cross-border robberies, especially cattle thefts and kidnapping of young women are a routine affair here, so much so that people close to the border keep their cattle in heavily guarded camps. In fact, according to Upadhyaya these robbers go around saying 'Taka rakhbi banke, goru rakhbi campe, bou rakhbi kothay' which means "you can keep your money in a bank and your cattle in a camp, but where will you keep your wife"?

Every community in the country - from faraway Mumbai and Delhi to nearby Assam - has protested against this infiltration which has tended to change the demography of the region. The only exception to this has been West Bengal, where Marxists and anti-Marxists have been equally vociferous against any pushback of infiltrators. Mamata Banerjee, supremo of the Trinamool Congress, the main opposition party in West Bengal, had protested against the apprehending and sending back of a set of people from Mumbai whom she termed as 'Bangalis'. This is indeed curious, as the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia, had shortly before publicly declared that they were not Bangalis, they were Bangladeshis - she even said that the Bangalis live on the other side of the border, meaning that only the West Bengalis were Bangalis. A crowd, with the active cooperation of the state police, raided a train carrying Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators from Mumbai en route the Bangladesh border while it was passing through West Bengal, and set the infiltrators free. Sunil Ganguly, the popular author, and a refugee from Madaripur, termed the pushback operations as 'the height of inhumanity'.

On January 20 2001, a crowd of Urdu-speaking Muslims raided and pulled down a statue of the late Ashwini Kumar Datta, a prominent educationist and thinker of Barisal, at Park Circus, Calcutta, on the grounds that the presence of an idol in a Muslim-majority area was offending their Islamic ideals. The police quietly acquiesced in the removal of the statue. The entire press corps of the city concealed the incident, calling it nothing more than a local fracas involving the putting of a statue in the middle of a playground. The Memorial Committee which had tried to erect the statue printed a few posters and stuck them on the walls in the vicinity - but even they were scared to say that this was done by Muslims. Instead they called it a raid by a few Urdu-speaking people.

On February 10, 2001, four young men called Abhijit Sardar (26), Patitpaban Naskar (24), Anadi Naskar (20) and Sujit Naskar (17) were returning from a picnic in the village of Uttar Sonakhali under police station Basanti, district South 24-Parganas, West Bengal. They were set upon by a gang of Muslims who dragged them into the house of one Anwar Hossain, and shot them at point blank range. One of the associates of the murdered lot managed to escape and ran to the police station to inform them of the incident. However, the police found time only after five hours to reach the spot. The local Circle Inspector of Police Abul Hasem kicked at the corpses and misbehaved with the villagers who had gone to lodge their complaint.

Local Muslim goons called Hakim Mollah, Raqibul Sheikh, Lokman Mollah, Waiyed Ali Sheikh, Khizr Sheikh, Akbar Jamadar have terrorised the general populace in the area, but their special target is the Hindu community. All of them work under the patronage of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or the Revolutionary Socialist Party, both partners of the ruling Leftist coalition in West Bengal. There are some 22 cases against Hakim Mollah, including several murder cases. He is the Secretary of the Local Committee of the CPI(M) for North Gosaba. The police say they 'cannot find him'[xxix]

.

India Today newsmagazine, June 25 2001 issue, reported a religious-educational movement afoot in Murshidabad district spearheaded by one Barua Rahamani Education Society (BRES) that demands 'purification of education' and 'true Islamic education' for Muslim children. The society was registered in 1993 and currently runs 109 Madarsas in the state, of them 35 in Murshidabad, 22 in Malda and 10 each in Birbhum, North Dinajpur and Nadia districts. The society is run by Islamic leaders with strong Saudi Arabian links, and is flush with Arab funds. The Madarsas of Dhulian and Beldanga, both in Murshidabad district, had respectively received contributions of US$ 164,000 and 176,000 - Indian Rupees 73.8 Lakhs and 79.2 Lakhs - from the Islamic Development Bank of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The Leftist Government of West Bengal runs its own Madarsas, but these are apparently not 'Islamic enough ' of the society, hence this parallel system.

The contents of these parallel education programmes are pure Taliban. In the book on Bangla alphabet the letter 'dha' (hard dha) has a picture of a dhol, the percussion instrument, with the line 'dhol tabla-e khodar la'nat' (God's curse be on music). The

intolerant Mughal emperor Aurangzeb is pictured as one who donated a lot of land and property to Hindu priests and Hindu soldiers. A book prescribed for Class V titled 'The Economics of Islam' written by one Moulana Mohammed Abdur Rahim and published by Khairun Prakashani of Dacca tells the students that the chief source of National Income is the divine act of expropriating the property of the vanquished enemy, something known in Muslim Bangla as Ganeemater Maal. Another textbook titled 'Mukammal Tarikh-e Islam' written by one Mufti Shaukat Ali Fahmi and published by Deen Duniya in Delhi's Jama Masjid area has an interesting interpretation of Mahmud of Ghazni's plundering of the Somnath Temple. It says "As the kings of Hindustan lost out to Mahmud the conqueror, the pandits and Brahmins of Gujarat began a conspiracy and they turned the temple of Somnath into the centre of their political activities. Mahmud came to hear of the devious plans of the king of Gujarat and the conspiracy of the pandits hatched inside the temple. He rushed to Gujarat, and by 415 Hijri he brought the temple under his grip". The commentator remarks "This version, far removed from accepted history, is taught to a group of Muslim students in a state whose rulers swear by secularism".

There is nothing wrong in one receiving religious instruction relevant to one's own religion. The problem with Islamic religious instruction of this type, however, is that it teaches inviolable dogma, prevents formation of an analytical and inquisitive mind, and, most of all, teaches the children from a tender age to hate all human beings not professing Islam. Does it also not nurture mindsets with which it will be possible for these students, when they grow up, to kill or rape Hindus without pangs of conscience as had been done in East Pakistan in 1950? Obviously it does, though the secular Communist government of West Bengal pretends that there is no such apprehension.

The reasons for such seemingly inexplicable behaviour are not far to seek : it is the love that secular politicians in India, especially West Bengal, have for the block Muslim vote. It is as if the secular politicians of West Bengal, with all the foresight of a Neville Chamberlain returning from Munich, are saying under their breath that if in the process West Bengal becomes Muslim-majority over a period of time and demands secession from India and union with Bangladesh then so be it, it's not going to happen in our time, and anyway it is in keeping with our 'secular ethos'. The secular politicians of West Bengal, many of whom are themselves refugees or children of refugees from Islamic persecution in Eastern Bengal, are avowed believers of an utterance of Lord Keynes : In the long run we are all dead.

The case of Hindus being persecuted in Hindu-majority India has been termed strange, yet maybe it is not so strange. This is a country in which more than two hundred thousand Hindus - the Pandits of the vale of Kashmir - have been driven out of that valley by the majority Muslims, are living like subhumans in makeshift camps in Jammu and Delhi for the last twelve years or so, and the rest of the country has not so far given a damn!

[i]

The demolition of the disputed structure at Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India often called the Babri Masjid (Mosque), marks a watershed in Hindu-Muslim relations in the South Asian subcontinent. The name 'Babri Masjid' is challenged by a number of Hindu organisations, who maintain that no Muslim has offered Namaz there for years, and therefore it is not a Masjid. It is said to be a structure built by Mir Banki, one of the generals of Babar, the founder of the Moghul Empire, after demolishing a temple that existed at the site marking the birthplace of Lord Rama, the legendary hero of Ramayana, and the embodiment of all that is good in public life. In early December 1992 a large number of karsevaks (People who professed to serve Lord Rama with their own hands) congregated there and on 6th December brought down the structure with their bare hands. This was followed by widespread rioting all over India, and pogroms in Bangladesh. However it is the first incident in Hindu-Muslim relationship spanning more than ten centuries that Hindus demolished a Muslim shrine, whereas the converse has been done for times without number.

[ii]

The Farakka Barrage is across the River Ganga in West Bengal, a few kilometres short of where the river enters Bangladesh, and becomes the Padma, one of the principal rivers of the Bangladeshi river system (see Chapter 1). The barrage was built with the intent of preventing the siltation of Calcutta port, and preventing the salinity of water in Calcutta. It functions by diverting a part of the water (which would otherwise have flown into Bangladesh) into the Bhagirathi river which later becomes the Hooghly and flows by Calcutta. This diversion has been grist to the mill of the anti-Indian lobby, led by the Bangladesh National Party and Jamaat-e-Islami, in Bangladesh.

[iii]

'The Feringi's Column' by Francois Gautier, Indian Express, Mumbai, May 22, 2000.

[iv]

Lojja (in Bangla, meaning ‘Shame’) by Taslima Nasrin, 1st enlarged Indian Ed., Ananda Publishers,
Calcutta, India, 1993

[v]

Phera (in Bangla meaning ‘The Return’) by Taslima Nasrin, 1st enlarged Indian Ed., Ananda Publishers,
Calcutta, India, 1994

[vi]

People unfamiliar with Indian traditions, especially westerners, are often perplexed and offended by the
use, by Hindus, of this symbol to which notoriety had been lent by the Nazis of Germany. Actually the
Swastika has been used by the Hindus as an auspicious sign from time immemorial, long before Adolf
Hitler was born. The Hindu Swastika also differs from the Nazi one in the aspect that the bars in the
former are vertical and horizontal, while those in the latter are diagonal.

[vii]

Lojja, ibid. p. 11

[viii]

ibid. p. 34

[ix]

ibid. p. 44

[x]

ibid. p. 15

[xi] Source : Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics data,
www.bangla.net/ndb/ana_vol1/religiou.htm

[xii]

In the bureaucracy created by the British in the South Asian subcontinent, a 'Secretary' always means a
'Permanent Secretary', a Civil Servant, while a 'Minister' is a political person who must necessarily be a
member of the legislature. The hierarchy runs thus : the secretariat is the top office of the executive
branch of the government in the country, and individual ministries are headed by Secretaries, below
whom there are Joint-, Deputy- and Under- (or Assistant) Secretaries. The Police

Department and the
District Administration are subservient to the secretariat. In a district the District Administration is
headed by a District Magistrate or Deputy Commissioner and the police by a Superintendent of Police.

[xiii]

Lojja, ibid. p. 94. The rhinoceros has a very thick hide, so much so that it cannot be killed by ordinary
bullets unless hit between the eyes. A person having the hide of a rhinoceros has thus come to mean, in
many Indian languages, a very shameless, thick-skinned person.

[xiv]

Hindu Sampraday Keno Deshtyag Korchhe, p. 1

[xv]

ibid., p. 18

[xvi]

ibid., p. 20

[xvii]

ibid., p. 25

[xviii]

ibid., p. 28

[xix]

ibid., p 39

[xx]

ibid., p. 45

[xxi] www.hrcbm.org/NEWLOOK/gajipur.html

[xxii]

Upmarket neighbourhoods in present-day Dacca

[xxiii]

Deshbhager Por (Bangla, meaning 'After the Partition'), a collection of short stories by Imdadul Haq
Milan, 1st Ed., Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, India, p. 9

[xxiv]

Banglay Hindu Musalman Somporko' (Hindu-Muslim Relations in Bengal)(Bangla) by Nazrul Islam,
Mitra & Ghosh, Calcutta, 1st Ed., p. 270

[xxv]

ibid., pp. 258-265

[xxvi]

Bharat-Bangladesh 2000 (India and Bangladesh, 2000)(Bangla), by Hossainur Rahaman, Mitra &
Ghosh, Calcutta, 1st Ed., 2000, p. 11

[xxvii]

Bhai Bhai Thain Thain (Brothers Must Stay Apart)(Bangla), by Nargis Sattar, , Mitra & Ghosh, Calcutta, 1st Ed., 1998

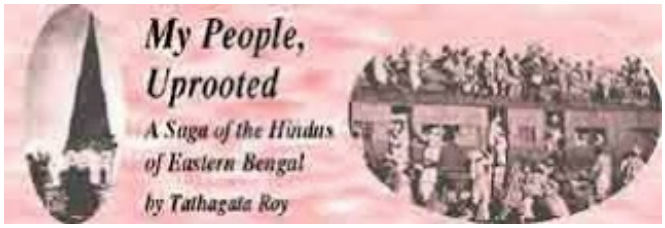
[xxviii]

Amalendra Nath Upadhyay, of village Pratappur, Hariharpara, Murshidabad, interviewed May 1999.

[xxix] Booklet published following the murder of Abhijit Sardar et al, by Tapan Kumar Ghosh. Also see post-
edit by Pabitra Kumar Ghosh in 'Bartaman', Bangla daily of Calcutta, February 22, 2001.

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-10-eerie-silence-meaning-of.html



Chapter 10

THE EERIE SILENCE : THE MEANING OF THE WORD 'SECULAR'

In any human society, people who had suffered the way the East Bengali Hindus did at the hands of the Muslim majority in that country would have showed their indignation in some tangible way. Indignation does not necessary mean reprisal, or the counter-expulsion of the compatriots of the people who were the cause of the suffering – although it must be said that, civilized or not, that is a very common method of showing indignation. Among other, and more genteel, methods of showing their hurt are : documenting (or getting others to document) the history of the period, writing novels relating to the period, creating cinema or other audio-visual media, observing one or more days in the year for remembering the suffering, creating catchwords to make people remember (like the European Jews' greeting, 'next year in Jerusalem'), observing other kinds of rituals such as lighting candles, and so on.

Moreover, under such circumstances, not only would the suffering people of the country show their indignation but the rest of the world would also commiserate with them, and show such commiseration in various ways ; such as conferring honours upon the persons who provide them with leadership, creating economic and political pressure on the tormentors, passing sanctions, getting eminent journalists to write articles and columns on them. Such articles would give publicity to the injustices committed and mobilize national and international opinion against them.

Consider the experiences and deeds of the following peoples :

The Jewish Holocaust, or the mass murder of the Jews by Nazis during World War II and the preceding years, is known to the whole world. It has been researched and documented extensively and intensively. Persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, which preceded the Nazi horror, and which has contributed the word 'pogrom' to the English language, as well as aberrations like the Dreyfus affair of France (not a country known for widespread anti-Semitism) are also very well known throughout the civilised world. Tonnes – literally tonnes – of books, both fiction and nonfiction, have been written on the subject, cinema has been created, drama has been written and enacted - some of it truly memorable, like 'The Diary of Anne Frank', or the film 'Schindler's List'. People like Simon Wiesenthal on the one hand, and organizations like the Israeli Mossad on the other, have been carrying out a relentless search for Nazi criminals, and ferreting out criminals, people like Adolf Eichmann from faraway South America. West Germany has paid

massive reparations to Israel. The whole world knows about the holocaust, and of concentration camps like Buchenwald, Belsen-Bergen, Dachau, Auschwitz, Sobibor, Treblinka. Every day thousands of people visit these camps and pay their respects to the souls who had the misfortune to inhabit and die in these camps for no reason other than their birth or race.

The 'Young Turk' government of the Turkey-based Ottoman Empire committed a genocide of Christian Armenians in 1915-16. One and a half million Armenians out of the Two and a half million living in the Ottoman Empire were killed off by the government who set violent criminals released from prison upon the Armenians. First the Armenians in the army were disarmed, placed in labour battalions, and then killed. Then about 300 Armenian political and intellectual leaders of Constantinople were rounded up on April 24, 1915 and killed. And finally, common Armenians were marched through the desert without food and water where most of them died from thirst. Some of them were loaded on to barges and drowned in the Black Sea. Armenians all over the world commemorate this great tragedy on April 24 each year. Armenian organizations throughout the world are also carrying out a relentless campaign to give publicity to this genocide[i]

.

East European peoples, such as Poles, Czechs, Russians, Hungarians and the Baltic peoples, who had suffered at the hands of the Nazis during the German occupation of their countries, or whose countries were parts of Germany before the war, expelled all the ethnic Germans from their countries after the war was over, and changed Germanic place names to indigenous ones. Thus, Koenigsberg became Kaliningrad, Karlsbad Karlovy Vary, Stettin Szczecin, and so on.

In the wake of independence the erstwhile province of Punjab of British India saw terrible rioting and mass murder, with the result that all Hindus and Sikhs were driven out of West (Pakistani) Punjab, and, in reprisal, all Muslims out of East (Indian) Punjab. This exchange of population of several millions was completed in a matter of only five months, between August 1947 and January 1948. The days are remembered in writings like 'Train to Pakistan' (by Khushwant Singh), 'Tamas' (meaning 'Darkness', by Bhisham Sahni) and 'Toba Tek Singh' (the name of a village, by Saadat Hasan Manto) and many others.

The whole world was up – if not in arms then at least through sanctions, boycotts, and other onslaughts – against the white South Africans practising Apartheid against Africans, 'Cape Coloureds' and Indians in the Union of South Africa. The country had become a virtual international pariah. The Soviet bloc and the third world boycotted them completely, and even in the West the weight of public opinion against them was so enormous as to make the rulers, the white Afrikaners, eventually capitulate.

Slavery, followed by deprivation of Civil Rights of African-Americans in the U. S. South (and less overt but equally humiliating acts in the rest of the states) has been denounced and censured to a great extent by white Americans as much as by African-Americans.

From the days of John Brown of Harper's Ferry who used to set slaves free, Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin') and Abraham Lincoln, down to Harper Lee ('To Kill a Mockingbird'), Erskine Caldwell ('God's Little Acre') and the Integrationists and the Freedom Marchers of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, white Americans had rendered great service in protesting against inhumanities by their racial compatriots. African-American authors who have written on the subject from their own bitter experience, such as Richard Wright ('Native Son'), James Baldwin ('The Fire Next Time') and Alex Haley ('Roots') are read by millions both in the U.S. and elsewhere. Through their books the whole world is constantly reminded of what had been done to the African-Americans by the Euro-Americans.

Leaders who have fought against Human Rights Abuses and State-Sponsored persecution of ethnic groups, and authors who have written against them have been awarded the most prestigious prize on earth, the Nobel Prize. The list is impressive : Martin Luther King Jr. (relating to Civil Rights for African-Americans in the U.S.), Albert Luthuli, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela (against Apartheid in South Africa), Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenytsin, Andrei Sakharov and Lech Walesa (against oppression in the erstwhile Soviet Union and Poland) and Aung San Suu Kyi (against Human Rights abuses in Myanmar or Burma).

All these injustices, all these inhumanities, culminating in all these tragedies have attracted the attention of the world and have been decried by right thinking people in every country. They are all remembered by the descendents of the people who had suffered them, and such people had devised ways to make sure that the tragedy is not forgotten by their descendents. They have all been carefully researched and documented, and such research and documentation goes on all the time. The facts have been meticulously sifted to find out whether or not the tragedy was indeed of the size it is made out to be, whether there was any fault of the side of the people who had ultimately suffered, whether any group was particularly to blame, whether the tragedy was spontaneous or a state-inspired one. The tragedies are talked and written about, discussed, argued upon, debated, analysed and extrapolated with a view to forecast future behaviour of given human groups. They form the subject of polite drawing-room conversation, the substance of learned dissertations in Sociology and Political Science, the material for political propaganda. Nobody ever suggests that such public and private airing of the memories of the tragedy concerned should not be done, or that such airing might cause disaffection between German and Jew, Turk and Armenian, Czech and German, Indian Punjabi and Pakistani Punjabi, Afrikaner and African, Euro-American and African-American.

Nobody ever says about these tragedies, 'let's forgive and forget', 'let bygones be bygones', 'let's forget the past and bury the hatchet and live like brothers', least of all 'let's not even talk about them'. Because everyone knows that the past is history, that bygones are history, that it is important to study history, that it is shortsighted and

stupid and obnoxious and ill-motivated to try to obliterate history. And it is also that study of history has nothing to do with forgiving and forgetting, only with finding out what had happened, why it had happened and putting it on paper.

Now, how is the persecution, expulsion and mass murder of the Hindus of East Bengal seen in the backdrop of the foregoing ?

Of the personalities among the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal who had occupied or are occupying positions of prominence in arts and sciences, literature, music, medicine, law, sport, politics, public administration and the like, at least fifty per cent, sometimes more, have East Bengali roots. To take just one example, of the seven Chief Ministers that the state has had since independence, four – P.C.Ghosh, S.S.Ray, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharyya - are from East Bengal. Some among the political personalities who had been brought up in East Bengal, such as P.C.Ghosh, Prasanta Sur or Promode Dasgupta spoke in the East Bengal dialect or with a clearly discernible East Bengal accent. All these people, together with the nameless multitudes who stand out for supporting a soccer team called East Bengal,[ii]

had lost everything behind the border. Some of them had been driven out by Islamic persecution, while others, like this author, had been fortunate enough to be settled on this side of the border before partition, and never went back to get what little was rightfully theirs on the other side.

In such circumstances one would expect the exodus of Hindus from East Bengal to be a hot issue among Hindus in the state of West Bengal. One would expect hundreds of books to be written on the subject, articles appearing in newspapers every now and then, research being conducted on the political, sociological and economic reasons for the exodus, as well as the fallout in these fields, debates on the question, demands that the property that the Hindus had lost on the other side to be compensated, and so on.

Instead one is greeted with a stunned, eerie silence. The subject is never discussed in polite society, never debated, never written about. If it ever comes up in the course of a discussion, people squirm uncomfortably until the subject is changed, almost in the same manner as they would in a case of incest in the family. Books on the subject are rarer than dinosaurs' eggs, and the few that are there have largely gone out of print.

The extreme paucity of published material on the subject, particularly relating to the East Pakistan era when the bulk of the persecution took place, is very intriguing and suggests that there was a concerted effort to bury this bit of history. Bengalis, with all their faults, are not the type to keep quiet when they find the weak being persecuted by the strong somewhere, no matter in which part of the globe it is. Thus there have been public outcries, meetings, processions, even bandhs[iii]

at Calcutta to protest against American bombing of Vietnam, imprisonment of Nelson Mandela by the South African white government, American embargo of Cuba, British and French bombing of Egypt during the Suez crisis of 1956, the death of Che Guevara in

Bolivia, Israeli shooting of Palestinians, unrest in Nicaragua, and so on. Yet, very strangely, in the case of the killing of minority Bengali Hindus in East Pakistan, their very own people, the majority Bengali Hindus of West Bengal, have never even organised a street-corner meeting or given a call for a 15-minute bandh.

This author had searched high and low all over Calcutta (including the famous Calcutta Book Fair) in search of books on the subject. Hundreds of books had turned up, especially in Bangla, by eminent authors such as Bibhuti Bhusan Mukherjee, Buddhadeva Bose, Sunil Ganguly, Atin Banerjee, Manik Banerjee, Samaresh Basu, Shirshendu Mukherjee, Narayan Sanyal, and others, as well as by numerous lesser-known authors on the subject of the miseries of the East Pakistan refugees after they came to West Bengal, how they had suffered in the camps, how a lot of them had to take to begging, crime and sex work, how they were discriminated against, taken advantage of by the indigenous population, both West Bengali and non-Bengali.

Not a single one on how they had suffered in East Bengal, the insecurity, persecution, rape and mass murders that had made them refugees.

Finally, as late as in August 2000, this author found A.J.Kamra's book "The Prolonged Partition and its Pogroms : Testimonies on Violence against Hindus in East Bengal 1946-64", published in 2000 by Voice of India, New Delhi. This is possibly so far the only (though incomplete) treatise in English on the subject. Kamra was himself a refugee from Quetta, Baluchistan, Pakistan. This book could not be completed owing to Kamra's death. As a result, what appears as his book is really a draft, polished up and supplemented by Koenraad Elst [iv]

, the Belgian researcher into Islamic persecutions. By going through the bibliography of that book, this author had discovered that a few books had indeed been written on the subject, all of which were now out of print or otherwise unavailable. A list of such books, with all the details that were available in Kamra's book, is also given in the bibliography to this book. It may be mentioned that Prafulla Chakraborty's 'The Marginal Men', first published in 1990, though very well-researched as well as an honest and forthright book, dealt mainly with the injustices done to the refugees in India, and discussed the repression in East Bengal only in an incidental manner.

Kamra was a West Pakistani refugee and knew no Bangla. This author has been more fortunate in that respect, since Bangla is his mother tongue. However the advantage he got from this fact was slight, since he discovered that the material in Bangla was equally scanty. All such material has been listed in the Bibliography.

Almost simultaneously with the discovery of Kamra's book the author also discovered another two notables, two very thin books in Bangla entitled Deshbhag, Deshtyag, (Partition, Exodus) and Deshbhag : Sriti aar Satta , (Partition : Memories and Existence) by a relatively unknown author called Sandip Banerjee, which actually contain interviews of Hindus describing their suffering in East Pakistan. In this regard these two books can be termed almost a pioneering effort. However, Banerjee has not tried to draw any

conclusions from the facts he had unravelled. On the other hand he has gone into the kind of sentimentalising with which Bangla literature is replete, and has also fallen into the trap of the 'equal brutality on both sides' argument. This argument, among others, has been discussed later in this chapter.

Simultaneously with searching for books in Calcutta this author had also searched the Internet for material available on the subject. What he came up with was again, very scanty, and has been listed in the bibliography. Two shining jewels in this scanty material are the websites www.mayerdak.com and www.hrcbm.org

operated principally by some Hindus of Bangladeshi origin in the U.S., U.K. and India wherein instances of persecution of Hindus in present-day Bangladesh are recorded in great detail - so much so that the Bangladesh government is understood to be exerting diplomatic pressure to block these sites. The remaining few sites are of very indifferent quality. However some of the material was interesting, in the sense of revealing a clear intention to conceal one aspect of the repression : that of the guilt of the majority Muslims of East Bengal. Actually it has been attempted to be done quite cleverly, through euphemisms.

Consider the following passage - a typical example of intelligent obfuscation - from the website www.bengalonthenet.com/culture/communities /east_bengal_refugees.htm

:

"East Bengal Refugees : . . . In 1951 Census found only 33.2 per cent of Calcutta's inhabitants to be city-born. The rest, including a small group of non-Indians, were migrants . . . . 26.9 per cent from what had become East Pakistan in 1947.They were primarily Hindu refugees, dislocated by the events arising out of the partition of British India and the creation of Pakistan" (italics by this author). The 'events' in the italicised part above were obviously atrocities committed by the majority Muslims in East Pakistan upon the Hindus, and the sense of insecurity thereby created. The fact that no hint was given as to what those events were is evidence of that mindset to conceal.

The search of the net also revealed that no attempt was made by India to give publicity to this refugee movement in international fora, with the result that the rest of the world knows practically nothing about the atrocities, the persecution and the exodus. Consider what the official website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which contains a page on India[v]

, has to say : "Historically, relations between the UNHCR and the Government of India have not always run smoothly. India abstained from voting on the 1949 General Assembly Resolution which established UNHCR, and publicly took the view that since India was not directly involved with what was at the time an essentially European refugee problem, it did not wish to participate. This position was maintained during the 1950s despite several UNHCR missions to New Delhi. India continued to believe that association

with the UNHCR would affect its neutrality". The question that arises is, what had prompted India to take such a stand when it was admittedly deluged by refugees from both wings of Pakistan? An answer has been attempted later in this chapter. It is however significant that the exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan does not constitute a major refugee movement according to the annals of the UNHCR, and does not appear on the webpages relating to India, Pakistan or Bangladesh, though the much smaller movement of Tibetan refugees into India does appear as such.

This author had also tried to access the authors, or their successors, of the books which had thrown some light on the subject, mainly with a view to get at background material containing information over and above what the books revealed. On September 10, 2000 the author had a short interview with Aloke Banerjee, son of the late Hiranmay Banerjee of the ICS whose 'Udbastu' has been extensively quoted from in Chapter 5 and 6. The objective was to get any background material for his book, such as notes, letters etc. which did not find a place in the book when it was published. Aloke asked the author exactly what kind of material he was after. Upon being told, he promptly remarked "Oh, the sort of thing that happened when a Hindu woman had gone to take a dip in a pond? No, that was considered too explosive, and my father did not keep any notes other than the one relating to the pond incident".

Tushar Bhattacharyya, a correspondent from Manindranagar, Murshidabad, wrote a letter in the Ananda Bazar Patrika of September 9, 2000 quoting the eminent and popular West Bengal novelist Sunil Ganguly : "It is not advisable to write a substantial novel about the partition of Bengal, because such a novel can provoke a communal riot." Ganguly, it will be remembered, is himself a refugee from Madaripur, Faridpur. Tushar Bhattacharyya wrote this letter in response to a feature entitled 'Na, Aamra Bhulini' (No, we have not forgotten) by Subhoranjan Dasgupta in the same newspaper of August 20, 2000, wherein the feature-writer, in very ornate and obscure Bangla, has tried to prove that Bengalis on either side have not forgotten the tragedy of partition and the mass movement of human flotsam. In the process Dasgupta has quoted a number of authors on either side of the divide, such as Narayan Ganguly, Atin Banerjee, Jyotirmoyee Debi, Samaresh Basu, Ramesh Chandra Sen, Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas, Selina Hussain and a few others, and the highly talented but equally dissipated filmmaker Ritwick Ghatak. The entire composition, to the extent some sense can be made out of the effusive prose, is however, a repetition of the usual 'refugee stories' : the same tendency to equate the guilt on the two sides, the same glossing over of the persecution of Hindus on the Pakistani side and the overemphasis on their plight after they had crossed over, the same overplaying of unrepresentative facts like the kind deeds of isolated Muslims in Pakistan.

Prafulla Kumar Chakraborty's 'The Marginal Men' has been discussed at some length in Chapter 5. It is an unusually bold and painstaking work. The author has concentrated on the plight of the refugees in India rather than what happened to them in Pakistan - but

unlike other authors he has not done so to jerk tears out of readers' eyes. Instead he has shown the individualism of the refugees, how they fought for their upliftment despite deep official apathy.

A 'highly secular' Hindu journalist of West Bengal, known for his whitewashing of Muslim misdeeds, has written a critique of Chakraborty's book. In that critique he has seriously tried to challenge Chakraborty's contention that the Muslims of East Pakistan had benefited by the exodus of Hindus from that country. Since he has no facts to support this challenge, he has taken recourse to widespread obfuscation of the basic issue by bringing in the oppression of East Pakistani Muslims by West Pakistani ones, and various other questions, including some statistics, of varying degrees of irrelevance. Finally he has justified the wrath of the Muslims on the fact that Hindu businessmen had repatriated all their profits to India. He has also said that the Muslims killed Communists rather than Hindus[vi]

.

Mani Shankar Aiyar, a self-confessed Pakistan lover[vii]

, a friend of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and a Member of the Indian Parliament, had been with the Indian Foreign Service before he had joined politics. He had been assigned to the desk for forging economic relationships with Bangladesh the very day Dacca fell. He remained at that desk for some time and made several trips to Bangladesh. He was subsequently posted as the Indian Consul-General in Karachi. He has published some of his reminiscences and observations in a short volume entitled 'Pakistan Papers'. Considering the experience he had in the early days of Bangladesh when the crimes of the Pakistanis and their collaborators were in the process of being discovered, and his subsequent stint at Karachi, one would have expected that there would be some mention of the bestialities. There is none.

Shyamal Datta Chaudhuri, a close friend of the author, a sensitive and well-informed literary person, and also a Hindu with East Bengali roots, raised a question to the author : "Must you write such a book? Why don't you let the sores heal?"

People like Shyamal Datta Chaudhuri, Aloke Banerjee and Sunil Ganguly are not atypical among the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal and the rest of India. They are typical. To take a very charitable view, these people genuinely believe that for the good of humanity, for the sake of good relations between Hindus and Muslims hereafter, this bit of history, the history of persecution of Hindus by Muslims in East Bengal ought to be buried, ought not to be made public, and not a word should be breathed about it, much less written, till all the people who saw it happen die away. After that, anybody’s attempt to document it can always be dismissed as hearsay.

What do such people have to say when told that the truth must out, that burying history is not a good idea? Generally they come forward with one or more of certain stock arguments which can be conveniently summarized as follows :

The 'Forgive and Forget', or 'Let bygones be bygones' argument

The 'Two wrongs don't make a right' argument

The 'There's a reason, they were also wronged' argument

The 'Equal brutality on both sides' argument

The ‘Many Muslims saved Hindu lives too’ argument.

The ‘It’s all the fault of the British’ argument.

The ‘Their religion is like that, what can you do’ argument.

The Classical Marxist argument, ‘This was an economic struggle’.

The Negationist argument, ‘It never happened’.

The first argument has already been discussed at length in the foregoing. The second argument presumes, before the questioner has had a chance to say anything, that he is suggesting expulsion of Muslims from West Bengal This comes to one’s mind very naturally because Muslims had been expelled from East (Indian) Punjab in retaliation of similar treatment of Hindus and Sikhs in West (Pakistani) Punjab. However, no one in right mind would now suggest such a thing in 2000 A.D. – if for no other reason then for the reason that the clock cannot be turned backwards. So there is no question of doing a second wrong, and the argument dies.

The third and the fourth arguments are a lot more pernicious. Most people would give these arguments because they have been brainwashed for so many years into believing such things, and they would say such things unthinkingly, believing these to be the politically correct things, even the fashionable things to say. There are two answers which can be given to these arguments. First, they are untrue. Secondly, even if they were even partly true, still that is no reason why the subject should not be gone into at all.

The ‘there’s a reason, they were also wronged’ argument is expressed often in East Bengali dialect as ‘Musolmandere amrandaoay uthte dei nai, niche dara karaiya katha kaitam’ (We made the Muslims stand outside the house while we talked to them but would not let them get on to the floor). A similar sentiment is expressed by the Hindus’ (especially upper-caste Hindus’) refusal to eat anything that has been touched by a Muslim, and so on. The sentiment or the conduct expresses the disdain the relatively well-to-do Hindus had for Muslim peasants, and implies that what the Muslims did subsequently to the Hindus is sufficiently justified by such behaviour on the part of the Hindus. The ‘equal brutality on both sides’ equates this sentiment and conduct on the part of the Hindus with mass-scale rape, torching, murder and expulsion practised by the Muslims upon the Hindus, and also magnifies beyond all proportion the rioting against and the expulsion of Muslims from West Bengal that took place in March 1950.

One of the reasons why these arguments seemed to be so acceptable to so many people is that they contain some truth. On the other hand these arguments totally ignore the scale of wrongs or brutalities done by the parties and, so to say, try to equate an ant to an elephant because they are both living beings. These arguments also ignore the role of the Indian state, as opposed to the Hindu mob vis-à-vis those of the Pakistani state and the Muslim mob.

The ‘equal brutalities on both sides’ argument thus conveniently ignores the facts that the total number of Muslims killed in the 1950 riots in Calcutta was acknowledged by Radio Pakistan to be no more than twenty, and that the Governments of West Bengal and India did their utmost to quell the rioting and ensure the safety of the beleaguered Muslims ; that, following the Nehru-Liaquat pact the bulk of the Muslims who had left West Bengal came back, whereas practically no Hindu went back to East Pakistan ; and that the state-owned Radio Pakistan openly spread canards about atrocities committed on Muslims in West Bengal, and put the number of Muslims killed in Calcutta to be around 10,000 (a figure which they themselves later scaled down to twenty) and practically incited Muslims to kill Hindus. It ignores the facts that during the Calcutta or Noakhali killings of 1946, or the killings of 1950, 1964 and 1971 in East Pakistan, the role of the Muslim League government of Bengal, or the Pakistani state was openly supportive of the killers, and that constitutes Human Rights Violation. As opposed to this the Indian state did its best, in both word and deed, to quell disturbances. And this was possible because India is a Hindu country, and Hindus are an incredibly forgiving people - perhaps to a fault!

No example of this particular aspect of the Hindu mind is more telling than a quotation from Abul Mansur Ahmad, a prominent East Pakistani politician. He had stayed on for some time in Calcutta after the partition of the province. After the assassination of Gandhi on 30th January 1948, the Government of West Bengal decided to bring out a volume containing the reactions of people of various walks of life under the editorship of Prafulla Chandra Sen, then Minister in charge of Civil Supplies (later Chief Minister of the state). Ahmad was one of the persons invited to contribute to the volume. He wrote "the greatness of the Mahatma is justified by the rottenness of the Hindus. . . . . only someone as low and disgusting as a Hindu could think of killing such a person. His death proved that he was the greatest man of our times ; it also proved that Hindus are the worst people on this earth. Allah had sent him to this earth to reform this sick bunch of people".

Ahmad then remarks that this observation was appreciated by many Hindus, including Sen, the editor ; also that he later realised that it was possible only for Hindus to appreciate such a comment about them by a Muslim in Hindustan. If he had said such a thing about the Muslims he would have to follow Gandhi and depart this world. And finally he realised that while Hindus are indeed rotten, they are great enough to comprehend the extent of their own rottenness

[viii]

.

Quite definitely, in some of the contemporary civilisations of the world, by no means intolerant, such behaviour as of Ahmad's would have resulted in widespread protest. The conduct of people like P.C.Sen, on the other hand, would have provoked a question like 'are these human beings or mice' (in fact there is a word in Sanskrit, for such people, Kleeva)? Is or is not the question justified?

Similarly, the ‘they were also wronged’ argument sidetracks the fact that the disdain that the Hindus used to feel for the Muslims was only partly a result of Hindu orthodoxy. The rest was the result of the economic backwardness of the Muslims, and certainly the Hindus were not to blame for such backwardness. As has been said earlier, with the coming of the British, while the Bengali Hindus took full advantage of the western education that became available, the Muslims withdrew into a collective cocoon, and the Atrap among them refused education, remained illiterate and became prey to the exhortations of the semi-literate village mollah, and it is this that basically caused them their economic backwardness. Disdain by the economically superior for the inferior, however immoral, is a fact of life, and exists throughout the world. No Hindu would have dared to talk that way to the Muslim Daroga (officer-in-charge) of the local police station, or to a Muslim zamindar.

An extreme case of the the third and fourth arguments, with minor variations but with all the trappings of serious history-writing, is to be found in Joya Chatterji's "Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47" [ix]. Presuming to be an 'original and thoughtful interpretation of the History of Bengal', the book is really a diatribe against the Hindu Bhodrolok class of Bengal for what Chatterji considers an unforgivable crime : having moved away en masse from nationalism and into Hindu communalism, directed against their fellow Bengalis, namely Muslims. This heinous movement is held to have manifested itself in the fact that the Hindus, who had opposed the partition of 1905 had actively promoted the partition of 1947. It is of no consequence to Chatterji that the Muslims were a totally communalised group, and moreover in the majority, and in no mood to allow any concessions to the Hindu minority (see Chapter 2, Nirad Chaudhuri and Rajsekhar Bose on the subject). It is of no consequence that the Muslim League had actively engineered two major bloodbaths, one at Calcutta, and the other at Noakhali, and scores of minor ones throughout Bengal. In describing the Calcutta riots she rues the fact that "Hindu culpability was never acknowledged. The Hindu press laid the blame for the violence on the Suhrawardy government . . . ", completely forgetting Major Livermore, General Tuker, Stanley Wolpert and Abul Mansur Ahmad (see Chapter 3), while she does not even mention the Noakhali pogroms. For her it was merely the Bhodrolok class making a last-ditch attempt, aided by the Marwari trading class (scared of the rise of the Ispahani empire) to retain their traditional privileges[x]. Writing the

book in 1989, eyes tightly shut so as not to see all that happened to Hindus in East Pakistan in 1950, 1964 and 1971, she persists in her perception that the partition of Bengal was the handiwork of a reactionary, decadent Hindu elite. In conclusion she states " If, by challenging the Hindu Communalists' claim to the nationalist past, the book has gone some way towards denying the legitimacy of their claims to India's future, it will have served a useful purpose.[xi]

"

It ought to be said that Chatterji need not have had any such fears. Her writing has been rubbished by contemporary historians who can, by no stretch of imagination, be called 'Hindu Communalists'. Amales Tripathi has called her explanations 'totally without foundation', adding that these are "fit to be researched only at Cambridge" [xii]. Partha Chatterjee has observed that her arguments seem to flow "from an astonishingly naïve view of nationalist politics"[xiii].

Now we can return to the argument that the Hindus looked down upon the Muslims badly, and the pogroms were a natural reaction to that. Now, granting that the disdain affected the common Muslim very deeply, and literally got under their skin, still can it be accepted as any kind of mitigating circumstance, let alone justification, for what the Muslims did in starting the Great Calcutta Killings, during the carnages of Noakhali in 1946 or all over East Pakistan in 1950 and 1964? Can it justify the promulgation of the laws from 1965 onwards whereby the Hindu was deprived of his de jure position despite being a born citizen of the country, and never having done anything disloyal? It has never been alleged that the Hindu had done any anti-national activity in East Pakistan like espionage, sabotage or terrorism, as they had done in the British days in the same locale! Can it justify the Biharis' attacks on Hindu-filled trains at Santahar and Meghna Bridge, can it justify the massacres of Hindus by Bengali Muslims at Muladi and Madhabpasha in Barisal in 1950? Can it justify the mass murders of Bengali Hindus following the alleged theft of the holy relic from Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar, Kashmir in 1964, with which the Bengali Hindus did not have the remotest connection? Can it justify the butchery by the West Pakistani soldiers at Jagannath Hall and countless other places, or the written orders to the armed forces of a country to kill their own Hindu citizens? Can it justify the pauperization of the huge Hindu proletariat of the country by driving them out of the country and usurping the little property that they had?

Now to the fifth argument : that many Muslims saved Hindu lives is a fact, and has been repeatedly mentioned wherever applicable in the chronicle of atrocities in the foregoing chapters – for example in connection with the flight of Nalini Mitra from Khilpara in Noakhali (1946), or the care bestowed by Muslim students led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the surviving Hindus after the Fulbari station massacre (1950). It is also a fact, and this has also been mentioned, that the 'silent majority' among the Muslims did not participate in the atrocities – only a large number of Jihad-crazed bigots, and those who stood to gain politically or financially from the killings did so. However this is also a fact,

that the upshot of it all was that Hindus left the country by the millions, their belongings were plundered, their men were killed and their women raped by the thousands. The efforts of a few kind and sensible Muslims could not prevent the Hindu population of the country from dwindling, not only through the East Pakistan period but also through the Bangladesh era. So what does this show? First, it shows that those kind, sensible, and necessarily brave Muslims were only in a very small minority. Secondly, and more importantly, it shows that the Pakistani state supported the killers, plunderers and rapists; and therefore, even if the sensible Muslims had been many times more in number it would have made no difference. Those whose lives and belongings had been saved, and whose women were saved from rape and molestation will remain eternally grateful to those brave Muslim souls. On the other hand, taking a macrocosmic view of things, in the face of state sponsorship of the persecution, the efforts of these brave few were largely irrelevant – neither here nor there.

Blaming the colonial British for all the ills of the South Asian subcontinent is a very politically fruitful and safe exercise, and subcontinental politicians do it all the time. This is because the British do not bother to answer back. And even if they did, that would have immediately branded the accuser as anti-British, and therefore, by extension, a patriot. A Marxist former Mayor of Calcutta, in a talk delivered at London, blamed the ancestors of the largely British audience as responsible for ills of the hapless city, such as waterlogging and traffic jams, conveniently forgetting that there were no hawkers on the streets or garbage all over the city when the British ruled.

This is not to say that the British had no role to play in the animosity that existed between Hindu and Muslim that eventually resulted in partition of the country, and the expulsion of all non-Muslims from Pakistan. The public pronouncements of Bamfylde Fuller, Governor of the erstwhile province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, prompted by his boss Lord Curzon, and the misdeeds of John Herbert and Frederick Burrows, British Governors of Bengal during the nineteen-forties, have been mentioned earlier. These were particularly overt cases, but even Annada Sankar Ray of the ICS has admitted that it was an article of British policy to prevent Hindu-Muslim amity from developing. There is no doubt that the British had a very major role in sustaining ill-will between the two communities.

This is merely to say that that ill-will was not the creation of the British. It had existed since the days of Mahmud of Ghazni's plundering of Hindu temples, and Mohammed Ghauri's invasions into India. The British merely took advantage of it, fomented it, and sustained it. It is an absolute travesty of truth to say that relations between Hindus and Muslims were extremely cordial till the British began to rule the country. On the other hand there is no reason why such cordiality should not exist now. But for that it is not necessary to take recourse to falsehoods. In other words, it is not necessary to whitewash the past in order to secure the future.

On the other hand, given all their base deeds, it seems hardly fair to blame the British for a series of anti-Hindu pogroms that had taken place long after they had left. This is

especially so when, during their rule, Hindus suffered no such pogroms (except the Great Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali carnage of 1946, by which time the British had lost their will to govern) and could live in East Bengal with dignity. And if it was indeed the machinations of the British that resulted in the persecution of Hindus several years after the British left, as a kind of time-bomb action, then surely the Pakistanis would have realized their error by now and would have made public declaration of it! No such public declaration has so far been made, neither by the Pakistanis, nor by Bangladesh, and it is very difficult to accept the view.

The 'their religion is like that, what can you do' argument accepts that the Islamic code permits, if not encourages, the elimination of all infidels (through the provision of Jihad). The argument then turns over this acceptance to constitute a defence for repression, rape and mass murder. Thereafter it extends this defence and postulates that since it is 'a matter of their religion', no value judgement can be passed on such a provision and conduct, least of all by any infidel, and Hindus ought to accept what was done to them, and ought not to complain about it. Put slightly differently, because the majority Muslims, according to this argument, were acting in accordance with the tenets of their religion when they were practising this repression, it was the duty of the minority Hindus to suffer such repression in silence. The only recourse the Hindus had was to run, and run they did, so what is there left to talk about?
But what of the Hindu religion, don't Hindus have a right to defend themselves, or even protest? "Ah, but there you have a different kettle of fish altogether", such people would argue. "Hinduism, you see, is a very liberal, very wide, very all-encompassing religion, quite different from Islam and other Semitic religions. The Hindu accepts the right of any person to practise his religion. Therefore the minority East Bengal Hindu can only keep his mouth shut if the majority East Bengal Muslim, in the course of practising his religion, chooses to persecute the Hindu. And further, because the Pakistani state was an Islamic state [xiv], there was nothing wrong in the state permitting such repression, and no Human Rights violation was involved".

Is this not the ultimate in defeatist logic, or illogic, or of standing common sense on its head? Does it not amount to saying that if your code tells you to slit my throat then I have a duty not only to respect that code, but also to proffer my throat? Or that I don't even have a right to protest against your cutting of my throat, because it is sanctioned by your religion? Does it not erase the line between liberty and licence, something all of us learnt in high-school civics?

That brings us to the Classical Marxist view, that all this is really all an economic struggle, between the Hindu haves and the Muslim have-nots, and religion was merely the vehicle for the struggle. Just as Marxism been largely rejected by the world, so is this argument rejectable, if for no other reason then for the reason that it tries to make the facts fit the theory, and is also tainted with over-simplification. The facts were not that most Hindus were rich exploiters and the Muslims were the poor downtrodden. It is true that there

were several rich Zamindars among the Hindus, and the moneylenders who practised usury on the poor Muslim peasants were also largely Hindu. It is, however, equally true that the bulk of the Hindus were artisans, fishermen, cultivators, poorly-paid clerks and schoolteachers, small shopkeepers and the like, who cannot be called 'haves' by any standards. Likewise, there were a fairly large number of Zamindars and Darogas (petty police officers) among the Muslims who enjoyed a premier position in society.

The facts are that Muslim Zamindar and peasant had combined to oust Hindu Zamindar and fisherman. The reason for the fight was religion, plain and simple, and the sustaining force for the inhumanities was the inviolable doctrine of Jihad. Moreover, the atrocities were begun, encouraged and sponsored by the theocratic state, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Definitely there was an economic motive in the whole process, namely that of usurping Hindu property. However, to contend that is was the only real motive and the rest are all incidental is, equally definitely, an oversimplification.

Finally we come to the negationist argument : that all these never happened, that these are mere canards spread by 'Hindu communal forces' in India. What is this argument like? The following would be a very typical example.

"Well, maybe there were a few fights here and there, but nothing worth mentioning. There was no en masse persecution, no massacres, very few rapes, some isolated robberies and snatching, and even these were committed mostly by West Pakistanis, in a few cases by Bihari Muslims, almost never by Bengali Muslims". "But then why did so many Hindus leave their home and hearth of several centuries and cross over to India?"

"Oh, they did so because they perceived that they could no longer have the privileged position in East Bengal under Muslim rule that they used to have under British rule ; they would also have to look upon Muslims as their equals, something that they were not prepared to do, so they left."

"Well that may be the case with a few privileged Bhadralok, but why did the artisans, the fishermen, the cultivators, the Namahshudras, the Santhals leave? And even in the case of Bhadralok is it believable that all of them would leave their homes and hearths where they had been living for centuries and set out to a unknown country, into an uncertain future merely because otherwise they would have to look upon Muslims as equals? And if the Bengali Muslims were quite innocent of all guilt then why did they not take the side of the Hindus and try to stop the Biharis or West Pakistanis from tormenting them? Why didn't they, at the very least, regret these incidents and call the Hindus back after their own country, Bangladesh, came into being?"

" I don't know. But this much I know that Hera amadere taray nai, amra ichchha koirai aisi (They, meaning the Muslims, did not drive us out, we came away of our own)".

The conversation above is not imaginary but a real one, between a 60-year old Hindu

gentleman from the Bikrampur region of Dacca district of East Bengal and the author. He has wished that his identity be kept withheld. He was about twelve years old when they came away, and that was in 1947, immediately following independence and partition. As described earlier, there was no major disturbance in East Pakistan till January 1950, and as such the gentleman could see no reason for leaving except the volition of his father and uncles. In truth his father and uncles were very wise. They came away when there was not much plundering of their money and belongings, few cases of rape of women on the way, when there was still room in West Bengal and the exodus had not started in right earnest. As a result they could transfer their money and buy a reasonable-sized property on which the entire extended family was rehabilitated. After that he had not kept serious track of what was happening in East Bengal because he did not need to. Had he done so, he would have known that Hindu families from his village who had to leave in 1950 were neither so lucky nor as wise as his ; and also, they left not out of volition but for dear life.

A variant of the negationist argument is the argument that, granting that there were ‘a few cases’ of persecution, rape, murder or forcible conversion, the bulk of the Hindus came away for no reason at all other than sheer panic. If they had stuck to their soil and stayed on, sense would have eventually dawned on the Pakistani state as well as the general populace, and the atmosphere of cordiality would have been restored.

This argument really amounts to telling a would-be refugee “So what if so-and-so’s house has been set on fire, his sister raped, his brother beheaded and the rest of his family forcibly converted to Islam? Your house is intact, your sister is still chaste, your brother still has his head on, you are still a Hindu! Don’t listen to rumours and run to West Bengal. Instead, wait for good sense to dawn on the government. They are not all demons”. This was the argument of Dr. Sudhamoy Datta in Taslima's Lojja described in the previous chapter, and the result was that he had to suffer, and eventually migrate. If this argument is accepted, the word ‘insecurity’ would have no meaning, and one would have to wait till one’s own sister, not one’s neighbour’s, was raped. Apart from being thus rejectable, the argument also sidetracks the fact the state-sponsored persecution of Hindus was not a one-time, but a continuing affair, of which 1950, 1964 and 1971 were merely the worst cases.

Yet another negationist ploy would be "I can't believe that human beings could do such things to humans. Not in this century - this is not the middle ages!" Now here is something for such non-believers to consider : in 1941, in the village of Jadwabne in North-eastern Poland, the entire Jewish population of the village was massacred, not by the Gestapo or some other German outfit, but by their Gentile neighbours, Poles, with whom the Jews had lived for centuries. This is not all. One man was knifed, then his tongue was cut and his eyes gouged out while he was still alive. The general population, including women and children, were put inside a barn, doused with kerosene and burnt alive. People would believe this, because the Jews have not, unlike the East Bengali Hindus, chosen to forget the atrocities
[xv]

.

The negationist view is thus based mainly on the lack of personal experience, or on faulty logic, or is coloured by personal experience – unless it is a result of political ill-motivation. In the face of the documentary evidence and the interviews, the negationist view falls flat on its face. Also now in 2000, sufficient people are still alive who have seen the atrocities with their own eyes. Yet, negationism is very common in whitewashing the record of persecution all over the world, and is particularly common in India in regard to atrocities committed by Muslims.

Looking at it in a different way, these arguments are but manifestations of the proverbial Hindu tolerance, carried to the illogical extreme. It is often said that the Hindu is tolerant to a fault - not just about religious persecution but about other things like governmental apathy and corruption, public hygiene or the lack of it, down to violation of traffic rules.

Koenraad Elst, the Belgian researcher into Islamic persecutions, has masterfully analysed the negationism practised and preached in India by the Left-Nehruvian intellectual and political establishment (see later in this chapter for explanation of this term). According to him [xvi] this negationism can take one or more of several forms. The first is head-on denial, generally in the form of a general statement such as 'Islam is tolerant'. The implication is that people who subscribe to Islam can never commit such atrocities, and therefore, if all the atrocities took place there must be a reason other than religion (such as the Hindus' looking down upon the Muslims, economic disparity or exploitation, etc.). The second, the one most applicable to the instant case, consists of ignoring the facts. In this case the media and textbook writers simply keep the vast corpus of inconvenient testimony out of the readers' view. Another form is minimising or whitewashing of facts, or playing up unrepresentative facts. Of these the third is particularly relevant in the case of the exodus of Hindus from East Bengal, and is typified in the argument, mentioned earlier, that 'Many Muslims saved Hindu lives too'. As has been explained in relation to this argument, that many Muslims saved Hindu lives is indeed a fact - but it is an insignificant fact, an unrepresentative fact.

Among other methods that Elst has observed are accepting the facts but denying the motive, or blaming fringe phenomena. Of these the classical Marxist argument, that this was all an economic struggle of the Muslim have-nots is an example of the first, while Ashok Mitra's blaming of the devaluation of the Indian Rupee in 1949 as the reason for the 1950 killings typifies the second. Elst further mentions throwing up a smokescreen, in which the very terms of the debate are questioned, which in this case would be raising questions like: "who is a Muslim and who is a Bengali? And who, indeed, is a Hindu?"

The last resort is the use of slogans, in which the entire evidence is summarily rejected by calling it 'myth', 'communalist propaganda', 'blind prejudice', and so on.

The central point in stating the above arguments and countering them, and in explaining

Elst's observations on negationism is not to convince everyone that the arguments are untenable, or that Elst is necessarily right. After all this, quite a few people can remain unconvinced that there were atrocities against the Hindus or that if there were, the Hindus had not brought these atrocities upon themselves by talking disdainfully to the Muslims, or by looking down upon them, or for any of the other reasons mentioned. All such people who remain unconvinced have a perfect right to remain so. The central point is to question why these questions should not be argued at all, why they should be hidden, why there should be a conscious effort to obliterate history by contending that this might provoke a communal riot? What can justify the total, complete, almost eerie silence prevailing in India, especially in West Bengal, when the country and the state have been totally at the receiving end of things, having to provide rehabilitation to all the Hindu refugees without (unlike Punjab) any space having been created by departing Muslims?

It ought to be mentioned, even if in passing, that Elst was not the only foreigner who has expressed surprise and consternation at Hindu behaviour when faced with facts of Muslim persecution. Francois Gautier of the Figaro, a journalist resident in India, and a regular contributor to many papers, notably the Indian Express, wrote a web article on the website , entitled 'Are Hindus Cowards?' [xvii]

. The article used strong language, and was withdrawn from the net in a matter of hours, but this author was fortunate to get a hard copy. Parts of it, relatively mild parts, are reproduced below (because the article may not be easily available otherwise).

". . . . . The truth is that there are two standards in India - one for the Hindus and one for the Muslims. Did the 'fanatic' Hindus who brought down the mosque at Ayodhya (and brought shame on to secular India according to the Indian media) kill or even injure anyone in the process? No. But the Muslims do not have such qualms. When Gandhi said they were bullies he was being very nice or very polite. . . . . Yesterday and today when the Muslim world feels it has been slighted in even a small measure by the Hindus, these infidels who submitted meekly to Muslim rule for ten centuries, it retaliates a hundred-fold - this is the only way one intimidates cowards. After Ayodhya Pakistan, with the help of some Indian Muslims, planted bombs in the heart of Mumbai and killed a thousand innocent human beings, most of them, once more, Hindus.

Unfortunately for India the British, when they were here, had created an intellectual elite to act as via media between themselves and the 'natives' which today, thanks to the successive Congress governments, looks at its own country not by means of its own Indian eyes but through a western prism, as fashioned by the white colonisers and the missionaries. These brown sahibs, these true children of Macaulay, the secular politicians, the journalists, the top bureaucrats, in fact the whole westernised cream of India, are very critical of anything Hindu. And that is even more paradoxical when 98 per cent of them are Hindus. . . . .

. . . . They will grow up like millions of other western clones in the developing world who wear a tie, read the New York Times, and swear by liberalism and secularism to save their countries from doom. In time they will reach elevated positions and write books and articles which make fun of their own country, ridicule the Bal Thackerays [xviii]

of India and put them in jail ; they will preside over human rights committees, be 'secular high bureaucrats who take the wrong decisions and generally do tremendous harm to India because it has been programmed into their genes to always run down their own country. .

. . . . One would be tempted to say in conclusion "Arise O Hindus, stop being cowards, remember that a nation requires Kshatriyas, warriors to defend knowledge, to protect one's women and children, to guard one's borders from the enemy".

And do Indians need a Bal Thackeray to remind them of that simple truth?"

No comment is offered on this piece. It should be clear from the part quoted why the article was withdrawn so fast. However, and more importantly, it should be equally clear why the Hindu attitude has been found to be inexplicable.

Eric Hobsbawm had observed [xix], while defining history, that "All human beings are conscious of the past (defined as the period before the events directly recorded in any individual's memory) by virtue of having lived with people older than themselves . . . . To be a member of any community is to position oneself with respect to one's past, if only by rejecting it". Yet what has been attempted so far to be done, in India, West Bengal and Bangladesh is to refuse to so position oneself by maintaining this silence. With Bangladesh it is understandable, though certainly not excusable - but why India, and especially why West Bengal?

We shall now proceed to investigate the reasons for this inexplicable silence prevailing in India, a country that is about 85 % Hindu and is the fountainhead of Hindu thought and culture to the extent of being almost synonymous with Hinduism ; and also to find out whether and to what extent the observations of Elst and Gautier are correct.

India had been blessed with many bright, outstanding and multifaceted political personalities during its years of struggle for independence from British rule. There were people like Gokhale, Tilak, Surendra Nath Banerjee, C.R.Das and others who would have done any nation proud. As the nation’s luck would have it, all these stalwarts were gone either before or within six years of independence. Gandhi was assassinated in 1948, Subhas Chandra Bose was not traceable after 1945, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel died in 1950. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, whose greatness the nation has begun to appreciate only lately, died under very questionable circumstances in a prison in Kashmir in 1953. Of all the pre-independence figures of any stature, only one remained as the supreme head of the country, one whose word was law, one whose thought translated itself into

state policy without any serious challenge. His name was Jawaharlal Nehru, and he ruled India rather like a gentle, dreamy, slightly confused benevolent king than a democratically elected leader in the years between Patel's death in 1950, and his own in 1964.

In order to understand the silence it is necessary to go into one aspect of Nehru's political thinking, that of 'secularism' as practised in India. What we have to look at is not the classical or the dictionary meaning of the word, but the construction Nehru put on the word, which became the accepted construction in the years to follow, and which his daughter introduced into the Constitution of the country through the forty-second amendment.

Nehru absolutely detested religion, and considered it anathema to science and the thinking of a modern man. According to him Indian thinking was required to be moved away from religion and into science[xx]

. It was of no consequence to him that to the multitude of Indians, religion had an abiding and deep significance, that they could not conceive of life without the sheet-anchor of religion. This position, incidentally, has not materially changed at the beginning of the twenty-first century, thirty-six years after Nehru's death, and fifty-five years after his 'Discovery of India' had appeared in print. The late Promode Dasgupta, the all-powerful secretary of the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) of West Bengal, is said to have once rued that a Comrade of thirty years tonsured his head according to traditional Hindu rites when his father died. It has already been mentioned in Chapter 2 (see endnote 54) that the great Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda considered religion to be so fundamental to Indians that according to him "even if it were possible to push the River Ganga back to its source in the Himalayas and make it follow a new course, it would still not be possible to take religion out of the hearts of Indians". Gandhi was equally conscious of the unique place of religion in India, which is why he tried to make (unsuccessfully) religion the vehicle of a unifying political movement in the Khilafat era, and later made religious sentiments, like his Ramdhun song, and his own mysticism (like his listening to his 'inner voice', his vows of silence, his fasting) an inseparable part of his politics. However although Nehru was perceived as Gandhi's disciple in every way, in this aspect the two could not be further apart.

Equally, it was lost on Nehru that Indians had been fighting a Civil War among themselves in the years preceding independence on no issue other than religion, and that one group, the Muslims, had forced a partition on the country on grounds of religion, and had thereafter forced out all non-Muslims out of their Pakistan. To him these were all temporary aberrations, and India could still remain one and united on the basis of absence of religion, or in other words, secularism. This is why Benoy Mukherjee, Chief Press Adviser and Registrar of Newspapers, Government of India having observed Nehru at close range, called him a political somnambulist (see Chapter 6).

However, such was the mixture of atheism and libertarianism in Nehru that while on the one hand he tried to mould his party, the government and the country according to his

thoughts, on the other hand he did not interfere in any manner with the practice of minority religions in any manner. Thus, he modernised and codified Hindu Personal Law, but shied away from doing the same for the Muslims. In any case, during the 1950s he came to be excessively occupied with Foreign Affairs (he was his own Foreign Minister), and had very little time left for his own country. He even did not mind religion being made the basis of a political party, so long as that religion was not Hinduism. Thus the Congress party under his leadership had no difficulty in aligning with the Muslim League, the very antithesis of the Congress during the pre-independence era, in the state of Kerala in 1959. This happened after the elected Communist-led government of Kerala of E.M.S. Namboodiripad was overthrown following an agitation in the state led by Father Vadakkan, a Catholic priest. One thing he was not prepared to put up with, and that was the emergence of any politics founded on Hinduism or Hindu thoughts. He detested Hinduism even more than religion per se, and described himself as a 'Hindu by accident'.

At the time the political scene of India was dominated by the Congress which was in government at the centre as well as in every state. Among the opposition parties there were the Communists, various offshoots of the Congress like the Praja Socialist Party, Socialist Party, and others, and the fledgling party founded by the late Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh[xxi]

, the only party professing a Hindu basis. Although there was little love lost between the Communists and Nehru's Congress, Nehru's views on secularism coincided with their Leninist teachings wherein religion was considered to be the opiate of the masses. The ex-Congressmen in the offshoot parties also found no reason to differ with Nehru's views on the subject. Only the Bharatiya Jan Sangh steadfastly differed with Nehru, and termed his secularism nothing other than undue appeasement of minorities.

Meanwhile, along the way, the political parties in India had discovered a political truth. They had found out that even after the creation of Pakistan a very substantial number of Muslims were left in India constituting more than 10% of the population, that they were largely backward, and that these Muslims voted in a bloc, usually at the bidding of their religious leaders. This was quite different from the Hindu voting pattern. Hindus were divided along linguistic and caste lines, and moreover were much more individualistic, and switched their political loyalties frequently. The parties also found out that progressive and liberal Muslims of India, intellectuals like Syed Mujtabaa Ali, Danial Latifi, Sahil Brelvi, Rafiq Zakaria, Asghar Ali Engineer, Hossainur Rahman and others had no influence whatsoever on the Muslim masses, and were moreover a quiet, timid lot, and could safely be ignored. The key to these masses lay with the fire-breathing Jehadi types, like the Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, Syed Shahabuddin and his cohorts of the self-styled All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, and the like.

This truism about Muslim voting pattern has been criticised at different points of time, and it has been sought to be established that there is no such thing as the 'Muslim Vote', that it is a figment of 'Hindu communalist' imagination, that Muslims are just as discerning as Hindus while casting their vote. However the alacrity with which 'secular' politicians try to woo Muslim votes, and fall over each other in trying 'to be nice to them'

at election time effectively exposes this myth. Paul R. Brass, in a commendable analysis of the voting patterns in India[xxii]

, has always chosen to take the Muslim vote as a whole, and has shown how it remained with the Congress solidly till 1962, and how it thereafter shifted to Jaiprakash Narain's Janata Party, then back to the Congress, and so on. The voting pattern of Uttar Pradesh, politically the most important state of India, in the Nineteen-Nineties, had clearly showed that Muslims in the state had voted for that candidate in a given constituency who stood the best chance of defeating the Bharatiya Janata Party. The choice is usually worked out and disseminated to the voting public at the time of the Khutba, temporal advice given by the Imam to the congregation after the Friday afternoon prayers.

It ought to be mentioned that the Muslims of India are hardly a united lot. They are divided first by language, and second by their own great religious divide between Shia and Sunni sects. In regard to language, the Muslims of North India and Hyderabad speak and write Urdu, which is identified as a 'Muslim language', while Kashmiri Muslims speak Kashmiri but write Urdu. West Bengal, Assam and Kerala have substantial Muslim minorities, and they speak and write in the language of the state, Bangla, Asomiya and Malayalam respectively. The Shias and the Sunnis very often clash, especially at the time of their religious festival Mohurrum. In fact it may not be an exaggeration to say the number of riots in India between Shias and Sunnis has been no less than those between Hindus and Muslims. Yet all these different sects and language groups exhibit the same political characteristic, that of block voting at the bidding of their religious leaders.

As any student of Political Science knows, a sizeable group that votes steadfastly as a group is the darling of all political parties. All these parties, with one exception, therefore set about wooing the Muslims as a group, and their religious leaders, their Mullahs, Ulemas and Imams individually. To do this they decided to give a go-by to all Constitutional provisions that could be taken as abridging Muslim religious rights, notably Article 44 of the Indian Constitution. Article 44 belongs to the Chapter of the Constitution known as ‘Directive Principles of State Policy’ which lay down certain directions that the Government is required to take. Of these principles, Article 44 states that the State shall strive to have a Uniform Civil Code for all its citizens. This required that Muslim practices like a man being allowed to take four wives, and then being allowed to divorce any or all of them at will, be outlawed. Fundamentalist Muslim outfits, like the self-appointed All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, had always been against such an action, decreeing that Muslim Law had been given to them by the Quran, which was given to them by their God, Allah, and the state had no jurisdiction to change them. The Congress, the Communists, and the offshoot Congressmen all supported this demand of the fundamentalists, camouflaging their support by saying that any move for change in Muslim Personal Law must come from the among the Muslims themselves. The fact that abominable Hindu practices, such as those of Sutee (burning of widows) and Human Sacrifice had been earlier outlawed by an alien government, the British, was ignored. Only the Bharatiya Jan Sangh differed.

But the advantage of the fact that Muslims voted in a block would be negatived if Hindus,

much more numerous than Muslims, also voted in a block. Fortunately for the Left-Nehruvian establishment (this term has been explained later in this chapter), there was little chance of that. Just as Hindus prayed individually and not in a congregation, so also they voted individually. And if at all there was any group behaviour noticeable among them it was on the basis of caste. It is this phenomenon of caste which was used to great advantage by the establishment to keep the Hindu vote split so that it could not offset the effect of the Muslim block vote. In fact the only organisation in the country which has so far seriously tried to erase caste and language differences and unify the Hindus, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has been roundly maligned and condemned by the establishment as brazenly 'communal', 'fascist', forever trying to obliterate the 'essential plurality' of India.

The Nehruvian construction of secularism, and its acceptance by Congressmen and ex-Congressmen as well as by Communists and assorted Leftists was endorsed by a large body of like-minded intellectuals who thrived on patronage from politicos of these parties. These intellectuals were financed by the political leadership by way of lavish research grants, given plum professorships, and generally held up as the 'top brains of the country' in the field. The intellectuals, in their turn, supplied the politicians with the appropriate brand of history which was required to preserve what was according to them 'the secular ethos' of the country. The relationship was naturally very cosy, and no one was too finicky about how public funds allowed for research were actually spent. The eminent journalist Arun Shourie, now India's Minister for Disinvestment, has written a scathing expose on the subject in his book 'Eminent Historians'[xxiii], and the reader is referred to that book for a detailed study of the subject.

The combination of intellectuals and politicos, a very motivated, powerful and cohesive team, emerged as the think-tank of the country in the matter of Hindu-Muslim relationship. This team has been collectively referred to hereafter as the Left-Nehruvian intellectual and political establishment, or simply the 'establishment'. They worked hard, and gradually a firm political proposition, backed by a powerful propaganda machine supporting that proposition began to emerge. The proposition was, put very simply, ‘A Muslim could do no wrong’. Those who supported the proposition were called ‘Secular’, of course in the Left-Nehruvian sense. Thus a totally fundamentalist or traditionalist Muslim religious leader, or a Hindu political leader who embraced (physically) such a Muslim religious leader in public for the sake of Muslim votes, were ‘Secular’. On the other hand, people who did not accept the proposition or who differed with this view of secularism, came to be known as ‘Communal’. Thus any person who chose to point out that a number of Muslim rulers of India, such as Mohammed Ghauri, Firuz Shah Tughlaq, or Aurangzeb had committed untold atrocities upon non-Muslims, or that a lot of Hindus were converted to Islam upon threat of death, was a ‘Communal’ person. Any person who said that such atrocities, even if committed should not be mentioned for the sake of communal harmony, or that lower-caste Hindus converted to Islam voluntarily because

of the egalitarian appeal of the latter (without bothering to explain why so many others of these lower-caste chose to remain within the Hindu fold) was ‘Secular’. Further, by definition, only a Hindu could be ‘Communal’. A Muslim was always considered 'secular'.

A few examples of the hard work done by this establishment quoted in Shourie's book make very interesting reading. One example[xxiv] relates to the state of West Bengal, the state worst affected by Muslim persecution in East Bengal. Shourie mentions a report in the newsmagazine 'Outlook' that the Board of Secondary Education in Marxist-ruled West Bengal had issued a circular in 1989 to the effect that "Muslim rule should never attract any criticism. Destruction of temples by Muslim rulers and invaders should never be mentioned". Some concerned teachers from West Bengal brought to Shourie's notice a circular (no. Syl/89/1 dated 29 April 1989) issued by the same Board which deleted, from Class IX-level text books of history, passages relating to forcible marriage of Hindu women by Muslim invaders, forcible conversion to Islam, Sultan Alauddin Khalji's lusting after Rana Rattan Singh's (ruler of the Rajasthani state of Chittor) extraordinarily beautiful wife Padmini, and his subsequent invasion of Chittor, imposition of the poll tax jaziya upon non-Muslims, and so on.

The gulf between the so-called ‘Seculars’ and ‘Communals’ thus created by the establishment was made to widen and deepen further, and to take on undertones of respectability or otherwise, thereby giving rise to a clear value system. According to this value system it came to be civilized, liberal, polite and respectable to be ‘secular’. On the other hand it was boorish, fundamentalist, unrefined to be ‘communal’. Myths, stereotypes started being manufactured and making the rounds. A ‘secular’ person was pictured as gentle, liberal, peace-loving, urbane, cultivated, one whose friendships reached across religious barriers, or as a simple, God-fearing, peaceable villager who was full of love for all mankind ; a ‘communal’ person as a quarrelsome, narrow-minded rumour-monger, an alarmist, a bigot, a half-educated country bumpkin, generally a detestable character. Prominent people, especially politicians, fell upon one another to declare themselves more ‘secular’ than the rest in order to garner the Muslim vote bank. Moreover, ‘Secularism’ became a cure-all for other kinds (such as economic) misdeeds. Thus Laloo Prasad Yadav, Chief Minister of the Indian state of Bihar, who was forced to resign his post upon being named in a criminal proceeding for having an active hand in a scam involving billions of Rupees relating to purchase of animal fodder, was considered ‘all right’, because he wooed the Muslims and was therefore ‘secular’. The Chief Minister himself, when he was out of Jail Custody, termed his prosecution a conspiracy by 'upper-caste communal forces'.

It ought to be mentioned that there were serious flaws in this secularism. All one had to do was to ask a Hindu ‘secular’ person whether he was prepared to give his daughter in marriage to a Muslim (most marriages in India are 'arranged' by parents, a system in which the bride and the groom do not get to know to each other till the moment of wedding). The questioner would be met with a glare, an uncomfortable silence, perhaps a mumble ‘Don’t get personal’ or something to that effect.

It is this value system that absolved the Muslims of East Bengal of all their guilt in the terrible atrocities that they did upon the Hindus, and caused the Hindus of West Bengal to meekly accept the whitewashing of history by the establishment with a view to hide this dastardly crime from posterity. A mild dislike between the Ghotis and the Bangals, (natives of West and East Bengal) had existed until the nineteen-eighties - in fact there was relatively little intermarriage between the two groups, even within the same caste. This was played upon, and stories were spread - often by Marxist Bangals themselves - that what the refugees were saying about Muslim atrocities were gross exaggerations. Caste had ceased to be a political factor in Bengal after independence, and there was an apprehension among Leftists that hearing about Muslim atrocities in East Bengal might unify the Hindus in West Bengal in the name of Hinduism, and might cause them to stray from the path of Leftism. There was therefore a conscious effort to conceal the history, misinterpret it, dilute it, and use every trick in the book to make sure that it was forgotten.

The hard work of the establishment was rewarded with success. Gradually the value system struck deep roots, and it became taboo, unacceptable, verboten, in polite Bengali society to talk about the atrocities. No one among the Bengali Hindus said, unlike the European Jews, 'next year in Dacca', 'next year in Barisal' etc. In fact, if questioned why they had left East Bengal, the majority of West Bengali Hindus of East Bengali origin, even if they themselves were among the victims, would stare open-mouthed, as if suddenly leaving one's home was the most natural thing to do ; or they would squirm in their seats uncomfortably. Some would try smart-alecky answers, euphemisms, and the like. Few, if any, would say that the Muslims drove them out. And among these, most would immediately qualify their answers by saying 'but there's a reason, they were wronged too!' or 'but that doesn't mean that I bear the Muslims any ill-will - I don't ', before the questioner had a chance to ask him how he felt about the Muslims.

It is not as if the establishment worked among the Bengalis alone. It is merely that nowhere has the work of this establishment found greater success than in West Bengal, ironically, the state which has been the worst sufferer as a result of the persecution of Hindus in Eastern Bengal. The bi'gest factor in this success is the mindset of the Bengali Hindu in West Bengal that has been created over the last fifty-odd years, the value system that determines right and wrong among these people. But why are we particularly interested in the Hindu in West Bengal? Because this is where the bulk of the Bengali Hindus live, and without their being conscious of the problem neither will it be possible to ensure their own survival, nor will the Bangladeshi Hindus be ever secure.

Nowhere else in the world, arguably, has a set of people's sense of history been made to become so warped through systematic brainwashing, nowhere else do people imagine themselves to be politically conscious and yet live in a virtual world of political make-believe made of a glorious past, frog-in-the-well present, and foreseeably, little future as among the Hindus of West Bengal. This warp manifests itself in a strange pretension to

being World Citizens not bound by the mundane bonds of nationalism or religion. The Hindus of West Bengal are more aware of the problems of the Chechens of Chechnya, and the late Che Guevara's in Bolivia and probably of the penguins of Tasmania than they are of those of their hapless cousins in Bangladesh. This warp has to go if they are to survive.

There are other aspects of the warp too. By way of example, the average West Bengali Hindu also believes, in a vague utopian way, that socialism is the best economic system possible, that poverty is a desirable state, or at any rate, something to be proud of, that industries, generally, ought to be nationalised, that it is quite permissible occasionally to bring the entire state, or parts of it, to a standstill in order to protest against some real or imagined wrong by calling bandhs or putting up roadblocks. It is this mindset that tells him that it is not nice to call oneself a Hindu any more than strictly necessary or that atrocities done by Muslims should not be talked about.. It has been possible to develop such a mindset by feeding over long years on a strange amalgam of Gandhiism and Marxism.

Is such an amalgam possible, what is this amalgam like, and how exactly has it worked? To answer the first question, take the recent tendency of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (the party ruling West Bengal since 1977) of eulogising Gandhi, and trying to identify its arch-rival, the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (the main party in the ruling coalition at the centre) with Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse. It is an exercise in total falsehood, because the Communist party of India had called Gandhi (as also other leaders of the Indian freedom movement, especially Subhas Chandra Bose) the foulest names during his 'Quit India' movement of 1942, and had exhorted the people to help the British government in its war effort. On the other hand, the Bharatiya Janata Party, or even its forerunner, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, was not even born when Gandhi was assassinated. This amalgam is lately being actively promoted by the Marxists because they have discovered that, after the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the name of Gandhi sells better than those of Marx or Lenin.

The Marxists, it would seem, are terribly scared of any political opinions forming among the people of West Bengal along Hindu-Muslim lines. Strangely enough, the chief opponents of the Marxists, namely the Trinamool Congress of Ms. Mamata Banerjee, and the venerable old Indian National Congress are equally scared of the same thing - which is why these two parties have lent their full support to the Marxists in this effort. The Bharatiya Janata Party, with 5-6% of the vote share in the 2001 State Assembly elections, is not yet a very strong force in West Bengal. Yet it would seem from the earnestness with which the Marxists are pushing their Forget-History programme with their characteristic political efficiency that they have some real fears on this score. It should be remembered that the West Bengal branch of Communist Party of India (Marxist) is perceived by most political observers as a superbly efficient political machine where nothing is left to chance, nothing is decided without due deliberation and nothing is done half-heartedly.

As to the nature of the amalgam, it is a set of amorphous beliefs which are supposed to mark a person as 'secular', which is desirable, as opposed to 'communal', which is loathsome. These beliefs are the product of the value system that has been discussed at length earlier in this chapter.

There is an interesting parallel, however, to this collective forgetfulness of Bengali Hindus. In a very thought-provoking book titled 'The Holocaust and Collective Memory', the author Peter Novick has shown how the American Jewry, by far the most powerful section of Jews in the world, had kept practically silent about the Jewish Holocaust until the 1960s, but made up for it in the later years. In trying to analyse the causes of this behaviour Novick has delved deep into the psychology of persecuted masses, something this author is not trained or equipped to do. The only thing that he can observe with regret is that while the American Jews did wake up belatedly, no such tendency is yet discernible among the Hindus of West Bengal.

This author is a Bengali Hindu who has lived for most of his life in West Bengal, and it is not easy for him to say such things about his very own people, yet they must be said. Nowhere else in the world could the arguments that Elst had studied, and which are discussed earlier in this chapter, apply with more force and exactitude than in West Bengal.

Another factor which caused the Hindus to remain silent about their persecution in East Bengal must be mentioned. It is the large number of incidents of rape. Rape, or even molestation for a Hindu woman is a disaster of cosmic proportions for her and her relatives. It is, moreover, a social disaster, not merely a psychological trauma. There was a time when raped women were simply abandoned, on the grounds that they had been 'defiled', by their husbands, sometimes even by their parents, for fear of social ostracism, with the result that the raped women were driven to suicide or prostitution. Much later a novel in Bangla titled 'Louhokopat' (in Bangla meaning 'The Iron Gate') written in the 1950's by a jail official pseudonymed 'Jorasondho' and a film titled 'Adalat o Ekti Meye' (in Bangla, meaning 'The Court and a Girl') in the 1980's poignantly showed what social opprobrium was heaped on an innocent woman who had suffered the trauma of rape. It must be said that Syama Prasad Mookerjee's exhortations to rehabilitate Hindus forcibly converted to Islam in Noakhali (which also included an exhortation to rehabilitate the thousands of Hindu raped women - see Chapter 3) brought about a sea-change in the attitude of Hindus in this regard. Still, under these circumstances it is not at all unexpected that the near and dear ones of these women would keep silent about the pogroms, because it would bring to the fore the fact that their women were raped.

Now back to the secularist value system. The value system, it must be said, was a subtle device which worked in the minds of West Bengali Hindus to absolve the East Bengali Muslims of all guilt for the persecution of Hindus there. When it was a question of fighting for Indian Muslim votes all these subtleties were forgotten, and the secular politicos resorted to brazen appeals for Muslim block votes. Thus Siddhartha Sankar Ray,

a former Chief Minister of West Bengal and an outstanding lawyer, who has been dispossessed of his ancestral village of Hasari in Bikrampur, Dacca, had no hesitation in getting photographed hugging a Mollah on Id day, while he was Chief minister in a secular country ; nor in declaring that he would fight the case of the Babri Masjid Action Committee without any fees.

Was it this tender concern for the Muslim vote bank that caused Indira Gandhi to release all the Pakistani soldiers after the Simla accord without putting them to a Nuremberg-type trial for their bestialities. Not at all unlikely. Benoy Mukherjee[xxv], former Secretary, Press Council, who has been discussed in Chapter 6 above, however, differs. According to him it was simply that Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, outwitted and outmanoeuvred her with his suave charm and diplomacy during the Simla negotiations. Bhutto had argued that he would like to implement all that Indira Gandhi told her (like stabilising the situation in Kashmir by accepting the Line of Control as the International Border), and in fact he himself had thought of these things. However to implement these he needed to have credibility in his own country, and there was no way he would be believed by his countrymen unless he could secure the release of the Pakistani prisoners of war. After the loss of Bangladesh his credibility in Pakistan was very low. Once he secured the release of the prisoners he would implement all his assurances.Indira Gandhi, upon the advice of P.N.Haksar (himself a Kashmiri Hindu) decided not to insist on these assurances in writing, a fact that Haksar deeply regretted before he died[xxvi]

.

Indira Gandhi, a very shrewd politician otherwise, thus got completely taken by this line of argument, and released all the ninety thousand soldiers and officers, some of whom were guilty of bestialities that would have put the likes of Rudolf Hoess or Josef Kramer, concentration camp officers belonging to the SS, to shame.

One thorn in the establishment's flesh hurt very deeply, and that thorn is called Taslima Nasrin. What the thousands of Hindu secular Left-Nehruvian intellectuals, compatriots of the victims, fought shy of even hinting at, was written with brutal clarity by this frail young Bengali Muslim woman, a doctor-turned-writer from the northern Bangladeshi town of Mymensingh. The Left-Nehruvian intellectual establishment in India, especially West Bengal, which worries itself sick with the injustice done to Salvatore Allende in Chile, kept its customary eerie silence when the Bangladeshi Muslim Nasrin was driven out of her country by fundamentalist pressure, including a futwah for her death, and sent to exile in Europe. The political wing of the establishment even refused her a visa to visit India so long as they were in power, lest such visit should turn away the Muslim vote. There was not a murmur of indignation from the establishment when she had to wrap herself in purdah to return to Bangladesh to see her mother, terminally ill with cancer, and the fundamentalists bayed for her blood.

Such is the force of the secularist mainstream. Very few people in India or Bangladesh have dared to swim against this tide, or to take on the value system. Of them, Kamra, Elst, Gautier, Taslima Nasrin, Salaam Azad and Arun Shourie have already been mentioned. Among the others, special mention must be made of Swapan Dasgupta, Tavleen Singh, Pabitra Kumar Ghosh, Suhas Majumdar, Shiva Prasad Roy (the last three write in Bangla) and a few others.
How does this author know all this? He does because he grew up in this society and found himself deeply troubled by this behaviour, which extended to his own family and relatives, many of whom spoke the East Bengali patois, and yet would not blame the Muslim majority for the atrocities. But how can he say that he is right about his views, his analysis, his conclusions? How does he know that Taslima, Shourie, Elst and Gautier are substantially right and the entire Left-Nehruvian intellectual and political establishment is wrong, the elders of his family, who saw the partition and the exodus with their own eyes are all wrong - in short, how is he so sure of himself? The answer is that he isn't, but if anybody has a better explanation for a whole people, the Bengali Hindus, so completely forgetting a tragedy of this magnitude within such a short time, he is prepared to listen.

One question survives : why did the Bengali Hindus give up their homeland without a fight? Why did the East Bengal revolutionaries, Hindu to a man, who had braved the imperial power of the British, succumb so meekly when challenged by the might of the much less powerful Pakistani state and their rag-tag Lungi-clad Muslim rioters? Why did such people run away from places that were their homes for hundreds of years? This question has been rarely, if ever, asked. This question had been posed in Chapter 2, and an answer will now be attempted, based on interviews of a few knowledgeable people, followed by this author's own analysis.

Firstly it is not as if the Bengali Hindus never put up a fight. Dinesh Chandra Sinha records in his "Syamaprasad, Bangabibhag o Pashchimbanga"[xxvii]

(in Bangla, meaning, Syamaprasad, the Partition of Bengal and West Bengal) that during the Noakhali carnage (see Chapter 3), Surendra Nath Basu, a patriotic Zamindar of Narayanpur, Noakhali, kept the marauders of 'Kasem's fouj' at bay for several hours by shooting at them with his rifle. The marauders shielded themselves with corrugated roofing sheets, and stormed his house, caught him, trussed him up together with a few of his Hindu employees and burnt him alive. Advocate Rajendra Lal Roychaudhuri, the Hindu Mahasabha leader of Noakhali had put up a similar fight, and shared, together with his brothers, the same fate as Surendra.

Dhananjoy Basak, formerly of Nawabpur, Dacca Town, relates how they literally ambushed a bloodthirsty Muslim mob that was coming in a procession towards their area, armed with lethal weapons. They had come to know a few days earlier that such a procession would be visiting them from a Muslim police inspector called Nurul Islam who used to regularly visit one Rasaraj Basak, a distant cousin, for drinks on the house. Dhananjoy at the time was about eighteen tears of age and full of youthful vigour. They

gathered together an enormous load of brickbats on the terraces of the houses at the entries into the narrow lanes between Raisaheber Bazar and Bongshal More (Junction). Also, there were a lot of Hindu confectioners in the area who prepared several vats of sugar syrup and kept them boiling on the terraces. As soon as the Muslim mob tried to enter into the lanes they pelted them with brickbats and poured the boiling sugar syrup on them. The mob never expected any resistance, and dissolved in no time.

These acts of courage were, however, possible in the British days when there was some semblance of fairness in the state, some hint of the rule of law, some trappings of a judiciary independent of the executive, and the police force was mixed, comprising both Hindus and Muslims. In the Pakistani times the state openly sided with the marauders, the police was totally Muslim and openly partisan, and the majority population was either inclined towards them or indifferent. In the circumstances the Hindus could see that they had no chance at all.

Pratik Saha (not his real name) is one of those rare people who had seen the partition on both fronts. His family came from the Bikrampur region of Dacca, and his father was an Senior Executive of the North Western Railway, posted at the time of partition at Lahore where Saha went to school. His family narrowly escaped being slaughtered by moving to Delhi just in the nick of time. According to him his elders were all of the view that since the country had been partitioned anyway, an exchange of population must follow, and it should be allowed to take its natural course in a peaceful manner. There was no point in fighting, resisting or 'digging in', or doggedly persisting in living in Muslim East Pakistan. In pursuance of that line they all moved to Calcutta and its environs without wasting any time. This was during the relatively tranquil period of 1947-49, and they had no difficulty in doing so. They were given refuge by their relatives India, such as Saha's father who already had an establishment there. They were an intelligent and enterprising lot, and it took them no time to get absorbed in the Bengali Hindu mainstream in India. After that they all forgot that there was ever a country called East Bengal.

Sukomal Talukdar, who came to India from East Pakistan through clandestine channels following a pogrom in 1964, and is now a U.S. citizen, was of the view that leadership among Bengali Hindus was always provided by the upper castes, the Brahmins, Kayasthas and Baidyas. The revolutionaries had also come form these castes, as had political leaders and ICS men. These upper castes had 'run away' (his words) to India at the first opportunity, with the result that there was no one to provide the political leadership, and the Hindus who were forced to stay on were sitting ducks for the Jihad-crazed Muslims.

Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti, in his 'Marginal Men' mainly blames geography and demography for the helpless state of the Hindus. The whole of Eastern Bengal is a delta, criss-crossed by innumerable rivers, canals and major and minor water courses. Every bit of land is thus, in a sense, an island, approachable usually by river craft (and, in some districts like Barisal, only by river craft). The Hindus lived in these islands in an isolated,

scattered manner, surrounded by the Muslim majority. It was not easy for them to escape when set upon suddenly by a marauding Jihad-crazed mob. The Hindu-hatred of the East Bengali Muslims had reached such a pitch that most Hindus considered it better to leave instead of putting up a fight.

Anil Kumar Sen saw in the caste division of Hindus the main reason for their inability to put up a fight. The upper-caste Hindus are anything but fighters - in fact in those days they used to consider it beneath their dignity to do any physical labour at all. The fighting could have been done by the lower castes, the fishermen, the boatmen, the Bagdis, Namahshudras and Kaibartas, who in the olden days had provided the Paik-Barkandaj (musclemen) cadre of the Zamindars. They however, needed direction. There was no one to give them direction, because the upper castes had mostly already left for India. They were, moreover, a totally beleaguered lot, surrounded by Muslims who were either hostile or indifferent, and a police force which was cent per cent Muslim and which identified itself totally with the marauders. These circumstances had made their morale sink so low that there was no way they could fight.

Sen pointed out another feature of the Hindu populace which was, according to him, responsible for this state of affairs. It is extremely difficult to mobilise Hindus in the name of their religion, while it is equally easy to do so with a Muslim. It is not that the Hindu, or specifically the Bengali Hindu, is incapable of fighting, but to fight he has to be motivated beyond a point. This ignition point is very high, but if it can somehow be reached then Bengali Hindu youths can be made to perform extraordinary feats, as they had done during their revolutionary phase. During their persecution in the Pakistan, and later the Bangladesh era there was no one left in East Bengal to enthuse them beyond that ignition point. .

All these persons appear unanimous on one point : that the exodus of the upper-caste Hindus early in the day, and after that their being totally oblivious of what was happening to their kinsmen in what used to be their home once, was a very material factor responsible for the total lack of any resistance from the Hindus of East Bengal. It must indeed be said that it was downright selfish of these people who had found safe berth in India (among whom this author's family is also included) not to have spared a thought of all their compatriots that they had left behind in East Bengal. The least they could have done was to raise a hue and cry in India for their brethren in East Bengal. Even that they did not do, especially after the death of Syama Prasad Mookerjee (who was a West Bengali) and Meghnad Saha. It must therefore also be said that this total indifference and self-centredness of the Hindus of West Bengal (whether indigenous or transplanted, and thereafter rehabilitated) had contributed in no small measure to the insecurity of the Hindus left behind in East Bengal.

It has already been already been seen in Chapter 5 what plight befell those Hindu leaders who had chosen to stay on in East Pakistan. Jogendra Nath Mandal, Depressed-class Hindu leader of Barisal, had to literally run away to India despite having been a Cabinet Minister in Pakistan's Central Government. His letter of resignation described

incidents of Human Rights abuses against Hindus that he had observed as a Central Minister. It is an important document, and has been reproduced in the Appendix. Dhirendra Nath Datta of Comilla was the first East Pakistani leader to raise the flag of Bengali nationalism in the Pakistani Parliament. He was tortured and killed by the Pakistani Army at Comilla Cantonment during the holocaust of 1971. Satindra Nath Sen, an upper-caste Congress leader of Barisal, was incarcerated in prison and died there. Kamini Kumar Datta of Comilla also rose to be a Cabinet Minister in the Central Cabinet of Pakistan. He had the great good luck of having died a natural death. Prabhas Chandra Lahiri of Rajshahi, the Finance Minister in the East Pakistan cabinet headed by Abu Hossain Sarkar, and Basanta Das of Sylhet, a Minister in the Pakistan central cabinet headed by Ismail Ibrahim Chundrigarh, were disqualified under the Elected Bodied Disqualification Order (EBDO) issued by Ayub Khan's Martial Law regime (EBDO-ed, to use the expression then in use) and had to flee to India.

The truth is that when the might of the Pakistani state incited, aided and abetted the Muslim majority in the country to persecute and drive out the Hindu minority in the name of religion, the Hindus stood no chance, and no Hindu leader could have done anything to save them. The only thing that could have saved them is gesturing by the Government of India, and fear of reprisals against Muslims in India, especially in West Bengal (observation made without passing any moral judgement). Both the Government of India and the Hindus of West Bengal were supremely indifferent to what was happening to their co-religionists in East Bengal.

A mitigating factor in favour of the Hindus of West Bengal must be mentioned. The time was the nineteen-fifties and sixties, and the Bengali Hindu psyche was permeated by Leftism and Nehruism as explained earlier in this chapter. According to both these isms it was anathema to even mention the persecution of their own kinsmen in the hands of Muslims - what will the minority Indian Muslims think, what will the world think of us? Thus, once again we are back to the value system. There was none in Bengali society to take on this perverted value system, and the whole community played along, while the Hindus in East Bengal stewed.

The studied indifference of the Government of India to the plight of the East Bengali Hindus was another factor that had emboldened the marauders of East Bengal. Nehru, the political somnambulist, would never admit that anything could go wrong in East Bengal, because that would also mean admitting that the Nehru-Liaquat pact was a failure, which it was. The jehadis of East Bengal thus knew that after the pact the Indian government, merely from a misplaced sense of prestige of its Prime Minister, would thenceforth refuse to recognise that any atrocities were being committed on the Hindus in the East, and, at the same time, would bend over backwards to ensure that no Muslim of India suffered in any way. The jehadis had, therefore, nothing to fear. They had only to ensure that the persecution of Hindus never reached such a pitch as to cause a public outcry in India.

The ultimate reason for the Hindus not putting up a fight can, therefore, only be their

utter helplessness. It should not be difficult to imagine their plight. They were a totally beleaguered and threatened minority, devout idol-worshippers in a Muslim-majority country. The state offered them no protection, and incited the Muslims to harass and kill them and generally did all that is necessary to make them insecure. Every bit of news about some atrocity against the Hindus, every sight of yet another friend, relative or neighbour leaving for India made them increasingly insecure. Neighbouring Hindu India did nothing to help them stay on in Pakistan. Many among their Muslim neighbours were lusting after their riches, their land, and their women. In such circumstances all that they could do was either to leave, or to suffer in silence.

The same thing had happened to the Jews in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe, to the warring Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, to the Bosnian Muslims in Serb-occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina, and all of them had to run or suffer, often run and suffer. There are however, important differences. The Hindus of East Pakistan had another option which the Jews or the Hutus or Tutsis did not : the Hindus could convert to Islam. As already mentioned, very few opted for this choice. On the other hand, the Hindus of East Bengal chose to forget their slaughter and uprooting. The Jews of Europe did not.

And how do the later generations of the tormentors of the Hindus, the Muslim majority of present-day Bangladesh, look upon these atrocities? Incredible as it may seem, those among them who did not see the atrocities with their own eyes do not know or do not believe that these at all took place (except for the one of 1971 associated with the Bangladeshi freedom struggle). On the other hand the ones who saw it have chosen - with great deliberation - not to remember them or talk about them, in fact to deny them outright. The East Pakistani and later Bangladeshi state, as well as informed people, politicians, journalists and historians have taken great care to make sure that the forcible expulsion of Hindus from their land, the persecution, the torture, the mass torchings, the bestialities, the rapes of Hindu women are erased from their recorded history.

Consider Abul Mansur Ahmad's reminiscences. In 1950 he was an established lawyer and a politician of considerable standing, and had also a stint as a journalist as the editor of the Calcutta-based Muslim periodical Ittehad. It cannot be said in any way that he was an ill-informed person. Moreover, he had not moved to his native Mymensingh immediately after partition, but stayed on in Calcutta and continued to practise in the District Court at Alipore. He moved to East Pakistan only in April 1950. The preceding two months had seen some of the worst anti-Hindu pogroms in Bengal, including the Meghna Bridge massacre, the Muladi and Madhabpasha carnages, and general mayhem all over East Bengal, resulting in mass exodus of Hindus from that country. The newspapers of Calcutta were full of stories of the killings, gathered from the survivors themselves.

Under these circumstances there was no way Abul Mansur Ahmad, lawyer, alert and conscious citizen, and above all, practising politician, could have been unaware of what was going on in East Bengal. Even before this there was the Noakhali carnage of 1946 which attracted the attention of the entire world. Yet what does he have to say? In his 'Fifty Years of Politics' he says : "The historical truth is that, compared to other places,

there were very few communal riots in East Pakistan - in fact there were practically none. But the Hindus were leaving the country en masse. This was not out of fear of communal riots, but for other reasons. The empty slogans of 'Islamic State' and 'Administration based on the Sharia (Islamic scriptures)' mouthed by the Pakistani state had scared the Hindus. They were not scared for their lives but for their honour, for their culture and religion. . . . . The Pakistani administrators had a duty to make them feel secure, but were instead content with merely giving them a terror-free administration" [xxviii]

.

What is one to make of such blatant lies? All that one can say is that Abul Mansur Ahmad was indulging in verbal casuistry, implying that what had taken place was not rioting but pogrom. He has not even bothered to explain why, after having lived in Calcutta for nearly three years, with his right to abuse Hindus unimpaired (see his remarks on the assassination of Gandhi earlier in this chapter) he suddenly decided to move back to Mymensingh in April 1950! He mentions that he was suffering from a serious case of dysentery, but he certainly did not stand a better chance of getting medical treatment in out-of-the-way Mymensingh as compared to metropolitan Calcutta! The reason could only have been that after the intensity of the pogroms in East Bengal in February-March, 1950, and the few reprisals that took place in West Bengal, he must have felt unsafe here, but saying so would open a veritable Pandora's box. Ahmad himself clearly was not a rabid anti-Hindu, but all this must be the result of a misconceived sense of a duty to hide the heinous crimes of his compatriots.

This author visited Dacca in February 2001, and was introduced to M.R.Akhtar Mukul, a handsome, brilliant, engaging and multifaceted personality who has already been mentioned several times in the foregoing in connection with his book 'Purbapurusher Sandhane' (in Bangla, meaning 'In Search of our Ancestors'). Mukul has been a freedom fighter, broadcaster, politician, diplomat, author and publisher in the seventy-two years of his life. Mukul is not the sort of person to mince words, and made it be known, in no uncertain terms and at the very outset, that he was at once a proud Bengali and a devout Muslim, that he received unequalled love and approbation in Calcutta during his brief sojourn in the city during the days of the Bangladeshi freedom struggle, that he had Pathan blood in him (he is rather unusually big-built for a Bengali) ; and also that he disapproved of Hinduism (which he called the 'Brahminical Religion') and especially of West Bengali Hindus, including those of East Bengali origin. He said all this in such bonhomie that it was impossible to take offence at the man.

This author had gone to see Mukul to find out what he saw and how he felt about the exodus of Hindus in 1950 and 1964 - Mukul was around twenty in 1950, and had certainly seen some of the atrocities for himself. However, upon Mukul's introducing himself in the manner described above, the author decided that he had better follow Leonard A. Gordon's (biographer of Subhas Chandra and Sarat Chandra Bose, mentioned in Chapter 3 above) method, and 'just listen'[xxix]

.

Mukul said nothing about the atrocities, thus following the familiar Abul Mansur Ahmad line. He however said a rather interesting thing. According to him Muslims were tenacious by nature, and would not move from their homestead even if persecuted. On the other hand, Hindus were alarmist by nature ; and, to use his own words, the death of a 'Hindu cat' in Dacca could start an exodus of Hindus to India.

This author had heard about and bought Mukul's Kolkata-Kendrik Buddhijeebi (Intellectuals Centred at Calcutta) the previous day from the Book Fair at Dacca, but got a chance to read it only upon his return to Calcutta. The book is rather voluminous and heavy reading but unsubstantial. It is full of vituperations against Bengali Hindu intellectuals of the nineteenth-century renaissance, principally because they ignored the Muslims and harped on their all-India Hindu traditions. A person chosen for special abuse is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee mentioned in Chapter 1. All attempts to get at the subject of this book, namely the underlying causes of the anti-Hindu pogroms, failed.

Similarly, 'Khandakar theke Khaleda' (From Khandakar to Khaleda), a collection of essays by Mukul, describes the injustices and the tyranny practised in Bangladesh during the years 1975-1996, that is from the assassination of Sheikh Mujib and his family to the coming to power of his daughter, Sheikh Hasina. Some of the worst atrocities against Hindus were committed during these years, especially in 1989 and 1992 - see the writings of Salaam Azad and Taslima Nasrin, described above. There is even mention of supposed jubilation in New Delhi's 'South Block' (the Indian Prime Minister's office) at the assassination of Sheikh Mujib. The word 'Hindu' does not appear in the entire booklet of thirty pages.

To summarise, it may well be said that the Hindu genocide and exodus from erstwhile East Pakistan and Bangladesh has been sought to be wished away by Bangladeshi Muslims and secular Hindus of India. It is not mentioned in history in either country. The people who should have been the most concerned, the Indian Bengali Hindus of East Bengali origin, including a large number who had lost their near and dear ones in the pogroms, are the most indifferent. The reasons for this inexplicable conduct have been discussed in this chapter.

Three final questions : First, what is the number of Hindus who had to leave, or could not go back to their homes in Eastern Bengal, as a result of Islamic persecution in that country? Second, what is the number of Hindus killed and Hindu women raped? And third, what is the value of property that Hindus were forced to abandon in Eastern Bengal?

Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, there is no official statistics on any of these questions. Which is not surprising, since Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India have all together, as if by some unwritten conspiracy, tried to pretend that any of the above never took place. This is a subject that must be researched in great detail. This author is not equipped to undertake that research and must, therefore, relegate that work to

professional historians in the future. All that this author can hope to do is to kindle their interest in the subject. Yet this book would not be complete without at least some indication, however approximate, of these figures.

Decennial figures of population of Bangladesh (the term 'Bangladesh', for the purpose of this analysis, may be taken to include the land mass that now constitutes Bangladesh, and was earlier known as 'East Pakistan' or part of the British Indian Bengal Presidency), split religion-wise, are available from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' website, www.bangla.net/ndb/ana_vol1/religiou.htm

These figures show a decennial growth of 12.4 % in the Hindu population of Bangladesh between 1931 and 1941. Since during this period there were no unusual circumstances which could cause a sudden jump or fall in the Hindu population, this figure can reasonably be taken to be the normal decennial rate of growth of the Hindu population of this land mass for the purpose of extrapolating populations right up to 1991. If at all, this will produce post-1941 figures which are on the low side, because the rate of growth has itself increased all over the subcontinent due to advances in medical science and fall in infant mortality.

If the actual population of the land mass (which in every case is less than the population so extrapolated) is deducted from the extrapolated population we get a figure which represents the number of 'missing Hindus', that is to say the number that must have been either killed or migrated to India. These figures are given in the following table.

TABLE-I
Figures in thousands

Census Year	Hindu population extrapolated @ 12.4 % decennial growth upon 1941 population	Actual Hindu Population	'Missing Hindu' population for the decade
1941	11747	11747	0
1951	13203	9239	3964
1961	10384	9380	1004
1974	10892	9673	1219
1981	10512	10570	negligible
1991	11880	11179	701

Total 'Missing Hindu' population, 1941-1991 = 6,888,000

Total 'Missing Hindu' population, 1941-1991 = 6,888,000

To this must be added the population of Hindus of East Bengali origin (speaking the East Bengal patois, owning some property in East Bengal, claiming a 'native village' in East Bengal, etc.) who were in West Bengal or some other part of the world at the time of partition, and never went back to East Bengal, like this author's family. It is impossible to determine this figure today, but a very conservative estimate would be somewhere between one and two million. If these two figures are added they would yield a figure of about eight million, which is the total number of East Bengali Hindus uprooted (and a small number among them killed) by Islamic persecution in Eastern Bengal.

Interestingly, another approach yields the same approximate figure of eight million. According to figures quoted by Hiranmay Banerjee[xxx]

, the total number of refugees who had sought rehabilitation from the government stood at 2,662,601 on 31st December 1954. These figures may be taken as completely authentic, considering the access Banerjee had to official statistics, his mental makeup

and his reputation for righteousness. This figure now must be extrapolated to take care of the following :

(a) Hindus of East Bengali origin who were in West Bengal or elsewhere in the Indian Union on 15th August 1947, and never went back to Eastern Bengal.
(b) Hindus who moved from East to West Bengal after 15th August 1947, but did not seek any rehabilitation from the government.
(c) Hindus who came to India after 1954, including those who participated in the mass movements of 1964 and 1971.

No reliable statistics could be found which could help in this extrapolation. However considering the facts that the pogrom of 1964 was milder than that of 1950 but that of 1971 was definitely worse, an extra two hundred per cent over the 1954 figure to take care of all the above considerations would not be altogether unjustified. This would also put the total number of Hindus ousted from Eastern Bengal because of their religion at around eight million.

This figure, incidentally, is a little more than the current population of Switzerland.

Jogendra Nath Mandal, Pakistan's Central Minister for Law and Labour, in his Letter of Resignation put the number of Hindus who had left East Pakistan till October 1950 at Fifty Lakhs or five million - see paragraph 31 of his resignation reproduced in the appendix.

A sidelight about the population figures : the official Bangladeshi figures are much more accessible on the Internet than the Indian figures (see Bibliography for list of websites accessed). The official Indian website <www.censusindia.net>, apart from being poorly designed, crashed repeatedly, with the result that it proved to be of very limited use. On the other hand the Bangladeshi site <www.bangla.net/ndb/ana_vol1/religiou.htm

> of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics is very well-designed and user-friendly and proved extremely useful.

The second question is even more difficult to answer. Because the crimes of rape, torching and murder took place in East Pakistan, and there was no point in the Hindus trying to register a complaint with the local police - in fact at many places the police themselves were the perpetrators - there is absolutely no official statistics. Also the Pakistani police or administration were not like the SS officers of Auschwitz or Sachsenhausen who, with their German penchant for keeping meticulous records, had left all the necessary details for posterity. The only basis for estimation can be the figure of the total number of rapes during the 1971 holocaust that the Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed made before the United Nations millenium summit[xxxi]

. The figure was 200,000. This figure of course was not accepted by the Pakistanis, who called it a gross exaggeration. Even if this figure is scaled down to half to exclude exaggerations as well as raped Muslim women, and then extrapolated by 200% - an eminently justified figure - to take care of the rapes committed during the period from

1950-1970 and 1975-present, the total would stand at 300,000. And if we take it that for every rape of a woman there was at least one murder of a male, the same figure would result. One relatively reliable figure is available, namely that of Hindus killed during the 1950 pogroms. This is the figure quoted by Jogendra Nath Mandal, Pakistan's Central Minister for Law and Labour in his Letter of Resignation (see Appendix, paragraph 22). The figure is 10,000 Hindus killed, out of them 2,500 in the district of Barisal alone.

Now about property of which the Hindus were dispossessed. This is definitely determinable by going through the Land Records of the districts available with the Sub-registry offices, provided the Bangladeshi authorities permit it. However this would require a stupendous amount of research and is quite beyond the means of this author. This figure is also likely to be quite astronomical, considering the enormous estates that Hindu Zamindars had - including the famous ones of Muktagachha, Susang, Teota, Natore, Tajhat, Dubalhati and so on. This is, of course, if one has decided not to get involved in the Marxist controversy of whether the Zamindars could at all claim any value on the estates. In addition to that one must consider what Meghnad Saha had said in a speech before the Indian Parliament. He had said " . . . the city of Dacca, the biggest city in Eastern Pakistan, had a population of 200,000 before partition. 70 per cent of it were Hindus - 140,000. They owned 80 percent of the houses there. . . . . I know it because I come from Dacca". The other, lesser towns of East Bengal such as Comilla, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Chittagong, and Rajshahi, were all Hindu-dominated. The same position is stated by Annada Sankar Ray. The whole of Khulna district was Hindu-majority. Considering all these, the total value of property that the Hindus were forced to abandon in East Pakistan could run to hundreds of millions of Takas (Bangladeshi currency), even at prices prevailing at the time when they had to leave.

One interesting statistic could however be found.. According to research carried out by a group of scholars, the size of vested property in Bangladesh in 2001 stood at 2.1 million acres or 8230 square kilometres, constituting a little over five per cent of the land area of Bangladesh, a little more than five times the area of Greater London. The total number of households affected was 925,050[xxxii]

.

[i] University of Michigan – Dearborn, Fact Sheet : Armenian Genocide
www.umd.umich.edu/dept/armenian/facts/genocide.html
[ii] Bengalis are avid football (soccer) watchers, and the clubs of Calcutta occupy a premier place in the game as it is played in the country. Of these clubs the most important are Mohun Bagan and East Bengal.

The first is traditionally supported by West Bengalis, and the second, as the name implies, by East Bengalis.

[iii]

A Bandh (also called Hartal, Aam Hartal or General Strike) is a phenomenon peculiar to Eastern India, especially Bengal, when a call is given by a political party to bring all normal activities, mainly business and transport, in a particular region to a complete standstill for a particular duration, say 12 or 24 hours. Those who try to carry on with normal life despite the call usually get manhandled, even killed. The government usually obliges by being a passive spectator.

[iv]

Koenraad Elst (b.1959) of Leuven, Belgium.

[v]

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Country Profiles-India
www.unhcr.ch/world/asia/india.htm

[vi]

West Bengal Bangla Academy, monthly publication on literary criticism, November 1999

[vii]

Mani Shankar Aiyar's Pakistan Papers, by Mani Shankar Aiyar, UBSPD Publishers' Distributors Ltd., 1st
ed. 1994, p. 99

[viii]

Amar Dekha Rajneetir Ponchas Bochhor (Fifty Years of Politics, as I saw it) ibid., p. 220-221

[ix]

"Bengal Divided : Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47", by Joya Chatterji, Cambridge University Press, 1st Indian Edition, 1995.

[x]

ibid., p. 253

[xi]

ibid., p. 268

[xii]

Swadhinatar Mukh, (Bangla)(The Face of Freedom), by Amales Tripathi, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1998, 1st ed., p. 186

[xiii]

The Present History of West Bengal, Essays in Political Criticism, by Partha Chatterjee, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998, 1st Ed., p. 35n.

[xiv]

Bangladesh, it should be mentioned, is not an Islamic state. In fact it began as a secular state under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. However, subsequently President H.M.Ershad made Islam the 'State Religion', or 'Mazhab' and that position still continues.

[xv]

Newsweek, March 5, 2001, Asia-Pacific edition, article by Andrew Nagorski.

[xvi]

Negationism in India : Concealing the Record of Islam, by Koenraad Elst, 2nd Ed., 1993, Voice of India,
Delhi, p. 87-92

[xvii] www.rediff.com/news/2000/jul/27column.htm
[xviii]

Balasaheb Thackeray (b. 1926), one of the most remarkable and controversial characters in contemporary Indian politics, founder and supreme leader of the regional party Shiv Sena (the soldiers of Shivaji, the legendary Hindu hero). The party is quite powerful in the important Indian state of Maharashtra (of which Mumbai or Bombay is the capital), but exists in other states also. Thackeray began life as a cartoonist, and entered politics on a chauvinist, Maharashtra-for-Maharashtrians platform, but changed soon to a militant all-Hindu platform. He has since been outspoken against the secularism practised in India, and was the only major political leader to publicly own up the demolition of the disputed structure often referred to as the Babri Mosque of Ayodhya. He is decried as Fascist by

Left-Nehruvian seculars, but had won the sneaking admiration of many among them for some of his actions, such as banning of proceeding for Haj pilgrimage through Mumbai after Pakistan-trained Kashmiri Muslim militants declared a ban on the pilgrimage to the Hindu shrine of Amarnath in Kashmir. Both bans were subsequently withdrawn.

[xix]

On History, by Eric Hobsbawm, 1st Ed., Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, p. 10

[xx]

See Discovery of India, by Jawaharlal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial fund - Oxford University Press ed., 1999, pages 509, 520

[xxi]

The Bharatiya Jan Sangh is the forerunner of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the principal party among the ruling coalition in the Indian central government since 1999. The former was founded in 1951 by Syama Prasad Mookerjee through a joint effort of him and M.S.Golwalkar, the leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a social organisation dedicated to awakening the Hindus as Hindus. The party later merged into the Janata Party of Jaiprakash Narain in 1977, but separated and formed itself as the BJP when the other constituents of the Janata Party objected to its association with the RSS. The Janata Party does not exist any more.

[xxii]

The New Cambridge History of India : The Politics of India since Independence by Paul R. Brass,
2nd Indian Ed., Cambridge University Press / Foundation Books, Delhi, 1994, p. 237-238

[xxiii] Eminent Historians, their Technology, their Line, their Fraud by Arun Shourie, 1st Ed., ASA, New
Delhi, 1998

[xxiv] ibid., p. 63-68

[xxv]

Interviewed January 28, 2001

[xxvi]

G.Parthasarathy, former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, in India Today, July 16, 2001, p.34.

[xxvii]

published by Grantharashmi, Calcutta, India, 1st Ed., 2001

[xxviii]

Amar Dekha Rajneetir Ponchas Bochhor, ibid., p. 238

[xxix]

Leonard A. Gordon, in the preface to his "Brothers against the Raj : A biography of Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose" mentions an amusing incident when he had gone to Stuttgart, Germany to interview erstwhile Captain Wilhelm Lutz who was associated with Subhas Chandra Bose when the latter was in Germany in 1941. Gordon writes " I was greatly helped by Captain Wilhelm Lutz who told me among other things that Hitler's only fault was that he had lost. My Jewish identity had never entered directly into the research process before, but at Captain Lutz's home his wife asked me 'Is Gordon a Scottish name?' Since I wanted further frankness in my talks with Lutz, I simply replied 'Yes'. I did not go on to say that it was the name assigned to my Jewish grandfather when he got off the boat from Russia in New York . . . . I asked (Lutz) about the slaughter of the Jews. He used the old metaphor of having to break some eggs to make an omelette. I decided that I would just listen."

[xxx]

Udbastu, ibid., Appendix, p. 343

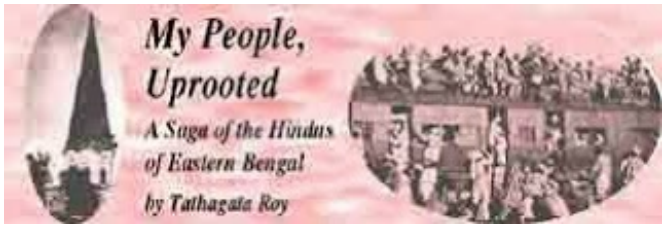
[xxxi]

Mrs. Sheikh Hasina Wajed, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, addressing the U.N. Millenium Summit, 7th September 2000, quoted in the Times of India, Mumbai Ed. 9th September 2000, p. 12

[xxxii] An Enquiry into the Causes and Consequences of Deprivation of Hindu Minorities in Bangladesh through the Vested Property Act - Framework for a Realitic Solution, Abul Barkat, Ed., Prip Trust, Dacca, Bangladesh, 1st Ed., 2000, p. 42

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/chapter-11-now-what-past-is-past-and.html



Chapter 11

NOW WHAT?

Here we must come face to face with a truth : notwithstanding the presence of the large urban, educated, enlightened middle class among the Bengali Muslims of Bangladesh, the presence of the other side of the chasm, the fundamentalists, the tupi-dariwallahs cannot be wished away. However much education spreads in Bangladesh, however much tolerant the people become, however much they choose their Bengali identity to reign supreme over their Muslim one, the latter is always going to remain supreme with a substantial number of people. These people shall continue to be proud to call themselves tupi-dariwallahs - and occasionally cause very serious trouble for the Hindus. How occasionally, and how serious will be determined by how powerful they are compared to the other lot in whom the Bengali identity predominates.

Sir Vidia S. Naipaul, the famous Trinidadian author of Hindu Indian ancestry, now living in England, in the prologue to his book 'Beyond Belief : Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples'[i]

[i] has made certain very perceptive remarks that are very topical here and deserve to be quoted in full :

"Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's world view alters. His holy places are in Arab lands ; his sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own ; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved ; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are ; and in the Islam of converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. Such countries can be easily set on the boil".

Bangladesh was not one of the countries that Sir Vidia visited, either in the course of writing this book, or its forerunner "Among the Believers : An Islamic Journey"[ii]

[ii]. Yet, in the background of what we have seen so far, these observations are of Bangladesh and Bengali Muslims appear to be uncannily true!

In Chapter 6 we have seen Benoy Mukherjee describing Nehru as imagining 'secularism' to be the panacea for all centrifugal and divisive tendencies. He chose to forget that there was such a thing as pan-Islamism, that Islam called upon all its followers to unite regardless of nationality, that Allahu Akbar was not merely a religious slogan but a political exhortation as well. What Sir Vidia had said was merely a restatement of the same truth, in his inimitably expressive language. This is the truth that the so-called secularists of India do not see, or do not choose to see.

The anti-Hindu pogroms of Bangladesh are merely cases of, as Sir Vidia describes it, the country being set on the boil.

Now on to ways of saving the Hindus of Bangladesh : basically there are three methods of trying to ensure that Hindus are no longer persecuted in East Bengal, that is today's Bangladesh, and do not flee to India. First, we can choose to depend on the Bangladesh government to look after their own minorities, as all civilised governments are expected to. If Bangladesh does not live up to such expectations, some world opinion may be mobilised and brought to bear upon the Bangladesh government. Second, we can expect India, as by far the largest Hindu country in the world and the natural refuge of persecuted Hindus everywhere, to take more than a little interest in the plight of Bangladeshi Hindus, and bring unusual diplomatic pressure to bear on Bangladesh if need be. Considering that more than ninety-five per cent of Bangladesh's land border is with India, and the bulk of Bangladesh's external trade - both legitimate and otherwise - is with India, such pressure can be quite effective.

The third method, however disagreeable it may seem or sound at first, must be stated and argued out. It consists of India making a public declaration that if Bangladesh, despite all the pressure, cannot or does not ensure the security of its religious or ethnic minorities, then India, despite all best intentions, may also find it equally difficult to do so. The result may be a movement of refugees from India towards Bangladesh - unless Bangladesh decides to rein in its Hindu-baiters. It is not as if Bangladesh has never seen such reverse movements. Myanmar had driven out a large number of Rohingiya Muslims from its Arakan area across the Naf River into Bangladesh.

Let us now take a hard look at each one of these alternatives.

The first one is doubtless the most civilised, but it also requires civilised behaviour on the part of the host country. Sadly enough, the record of Muslim-majority countries, so far as their treatment of non-Muslim minorities is concerned has so far been found to be less than satisfactory - and Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, to boot. The record of Turkey in their mass murder of Christian Armenians has already been seen. Iran had driven out its Zoroastrians in the distant past, and its Baha'is in the recent one. The fundamentalist Taliban government in Afghanistan has just completed the demolition of the historic Buddha statues of Bamiyan, and has ordered its microscopic Hindu and Sikh minority (this was a substantial minority till Najibullah's days) to hang a yellow cloth in front of their homes. Pakistan, after having driven out their Hindu and Sikh minorities to the last person (the Granthis at the few Gurdwaras are exceptions), practises silent but

terrible persecution against their tiny Christian minority and their substantial Ahmadiyya minority (who have been declared non-Muslims) through operation of their anti-blasphemy law and countless other measures. Saudi Arabia prescribes stiff penalties for possession of idols for even private worship. Even relatively tolerant countries like Egypt and Malaysia practise heavy discrimination against non-Muslims - in the former case against their Coptic Christian minority, in the latter in favour of their Bhumiputras (ethnic Malay Muslims).

Why is it so? It is so because Islam, so far as conduct towards followers of other religions are concerned, is absolutely, fundamentally different from all other religions. A detailed discourse on the subject would be outside the scope of a book such as this, but the concept of Jihad, meaning holy war, something fundamental to Islam, may be singled out for a close look. The duty to wage and fight Jihad is a duty extending to all times. And, the hairsplitting by the mystic Sufis about Jihad-ul-Akbar and Jihad-ul-Asghar notwithstanding, to a simple man trying to follow the tenets of Islam, the religious duty of Jihad means killing an infidel, raping his women and expropriating his property. It is as simple as that. This is not to say that every Muslim does it - most do not. However, the ones that do, do all these with an absolutely clear conscience. And it is this aspect, this peculiarity of being able to kill, rape and plunder with a clear conscience which is important. Ahimsa (non-violence) of the Gandhian variety is totally powerless against it, because Ahimsa relies solely on the awakening of the perpetrator's conscience by the victim's lack of resistance. On the other hand, fired with the zeal of Jihad, the Mujahid (Jihad-soldier) perceives this lack of resistance as the inherent weakness of the victim's faith and the corresponding strength of Islam. Ahimsa would not have lasted for half an hour against Aurangzeb. This is something that is either not understood, or (more probably) if understood is deliberately sought to be obfuscated by the Left-Nehruvian secularists of India. This aspect has been discussed earlier - see Chapter 3 and the author's analysis of the Noakhali pogroms.

So far, in Bangladesh the conduct of the Awami League governments at the national level have been found relatively satisfactory, though that of the functionaries of the same party at lower levels has often been quite the opposite. Still it can be said that Awami League governments are not avowedly intolerant. On the other hand, the Islamist parties of Ms. Khaleda Zia, her husband General Ziaur Rahman, the Jatiyo Party led by Gen. Ershad and most particularly the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami have acted in a brazenly anti-Hindu manner. One of the worst offenders against Hindus has been the Islamic Chhatra Shibir, the fundamentalist students' outfit affiliated to the Jamaat. Of these, Khaleda had declared in 1996 during her last election campaign that if the Awami League is voted to power the sound of Azaan calling the faithful to prayer would soon be replaced all over Bangladesh by the sound of blowing conch-shells (a part of Hindu rituals). In the runup to the 2001 elections however, Ms. Zia has visited the Dhakeswari (Guardian Goddess of Dacca) temple for the first time, and has assured all protection to the Hindus.

In spite of the Awami League being the best bet for the beleaguered Hindus of

Bangladesh, persecution of Hindus has certainly not abated in Bangladesh, as has been seen in Chapter 9. The latest position is available at the websites of www.mayerdak.com or www.hrcbm.org

. There are few pogroms now of course, but a large number of isolated incidents all over rural Bangladesh of intense pressure on Hindus to sell their land for a pittance and go away to India. There is also pressure to give their daughters in marriage to Muslims. There are robberies on Hindu property, with the police taking little or no action. There is verbal persecution in calling the Hindus Malaun (an Arabic term, meaning 'accursed'), and in constantly reminding them that this is not their country, that they had better go away to India. And there is persecution of Hindu women : catcalls, obscene gestures, threats, molestation and rape.

If this is the condition of Hindus under the relatively benevolent, Hindu-friendly Awami League rule, one can very well imagine what it would be under the Islamic Oikya Jote (Islamic Coalition, consisting of BNP, Jamaat, and several other small parties) rule. The conclusion is clear : as things seem to be at present and in the foreseeable future, the Bangladeshi government, of whatever colour, cannot be relied upon to look after its Hindus and give them a reasonable measure of security.

Now we come to the second alternative : the Indian government taking more than a little interest in the welfare of Bangladeshi Hindus, and using necessary pressure on Bangladesh to ensure their security. It would be apparent at first sight that this proposition is in complete antithesis to the legalistic view earlier taken, namely that Bangladeshi Hindus are foreign nationals in a foreign country, and India cannot interfere in their affairs. This is the view that was canvassed to justify India's inaction in the face of Pakistani bestialities of 1950. This view is in complete negation of the reality of Hindu-Muslim equations in the subcontinent, and the time has come to snap out of this Nehruvian delusion.

Why is this called a delusion? Because any insecurity that Hindus may be subjected in Eastern Bengal will immediately result in an exodus into India. As said earlier, apart from being the nation with the largest Hindu population in the world, India is the natural refuge of Hindus all over the world, and any Hindu feeling insecure anywhere - Uganda, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Fiji or Bangladesh will run to India. India, therefore cannot, and should not, remain indifferent to their plight, and has to apply pressure on the country where such Hindus are feeling insecure. Such pressure can take the form of normal diplomatic pressure, commercial and financial pressure, involving third countries, involving the UNHCR and so on, down to some arms-rattling.

Now on to the third, and disagreeable alternative : can or should India contend that in the face of insecurity of Hindus in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, India cannot ensure the security of its own Muslim citizens? Can the pressure extend so far?

It cannot be denied that this extension would be a very logical outcome. Put very simply, if Muslim-majority Bangladesh cannot ensure the security of its Bengali Hindu minority,

how can Hindu-majority India be expected to ensure the security of the Muslim minority? And why should it be so expected?

The answer to this simple question is also very simple : life is not logic, life is experience. Granted that it would be very logical to do unto the Indian Muslim minority what Pakistan or Bangladesh did to their Hindu, Buddhist or Christian minorities, Hindu India will not do it, cannot do it. Because Hindus are not in the habit of doing it, because it goes against the very nature of the country, the Hindu ethos, the Hindu experience. Because Hindus are Hindus, and if that means that they are illogical, soft, even cowardly, then so be it. The Muslim minority will continue to live in India without fear or favour, as proud citizens of multi-religious India, as will the minority Christians, the Zoroastrians, the few Jews that are still left in this country, incidentally one of the few in the world that has known no anti-Semitism, ever. Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains of course had their religion born in this country, and they are not minorities at all in the sense the others are.

To put it differently, Hindu India will proudly tell the world that no matter what happens, it refuses to persecute its minority, or even to threaten to persecute them.

On the other hand, a caveat : just as Hindu India will not persecute its minorities, it must also not go to the opposite extreme, a typical Hindu failing. It must not bend over backwards to please the minorities because they vote in a block, and give them undue favours - in other words it must not, in a roundabout way, persecute its majority, something which is possible in the world only in Hindu India. It must not countenance extra-territorial loyalties within the country in the name of putting up with religious nuances of minorities. It must not countenance persecution of Hindu minorities elsewhere, especially Bangladesh, because Hindus everywhere are India's business, no matter what the legalities are. It must, under no circumstances, let its demographic composition be altered, even locally, through infiltration or widely dissimilar birth rates. It must remain a democratic country, a civilised country, a tolerant country, a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multilingual country - but a country, one country, one strong country. And the only way to ensure that is to ensure that India remains an overwhelmingly Hindu country.

[iii]

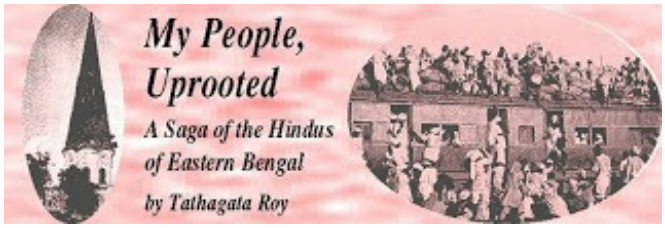
[i] Beyond Belief : Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples, by V.S.Naipaul, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, India, 1st Penguin Ed. 1998, p. 1.

[iv][ii] Among the Believers : An Islamic Journey, by V.S.Naipaul, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1st Ed., 1981

A Saga of the Hindus of Eastern Bengal" by Tathagata Roy

bengalvoice.blogspot.com/2008/05/illustrations-dr.html

ILLUSTRATIONS



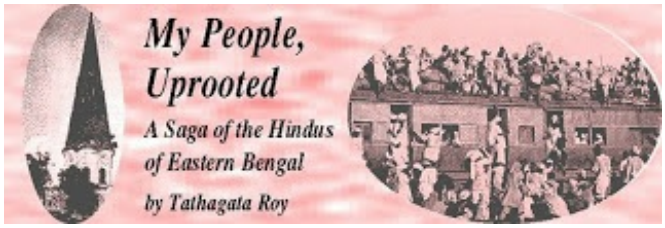
Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee visiting Dhubulia refugee camp, 9th June, 1950. (By courtesy of Ashutosh Mookerjee Memorial Institute, Calcutta)

Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee at refugee camp in Nadia under Construction, 7th June 1950.

Hindu corpses dumped between Tikatuli and Wari, Dacca, August 1946. (By courtesy of Rabindra Nath Datta)

Bengal Presidency, Till 15th August 1947

SIKKIM
BHUTAN
Darjeeling
Siliguri
JALPAIGURI
COOCH BEHAR
Rangpur
DINAJPUR
Bogra
MYMENSINGH
SYLHET
COCHAR
Rajshahi
PABNA
DACCA
KUSHTIA
HARIJAN
TRIPURA STATE
MANBHUM
BURDWAN
JESSORE
Bankura
Midnapore
24-Parganas
Chittagong
ORISSA
BAY OF BENGAL



APPENDIX 1

JOGENDRA NATH MANDAL'S
RESIGNATION LETTER TO LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

FULL TEXT OF THE LETTER OF RESIGNATION DATED 8TH OCTOBER 1950 OF JOGENDRA NATH MANDAL,
MINISTER FOR LAW AND LABOUR, GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN,
ADDRESSED TO LIAQUAT ALI KHAN, PRIME MINISTER OF PAKISTAN

My dear Prime Minister

It is with a heavy heart and a sense of utter frustration at the failure of my lifelong mission to uplift the backward Hindu masses of East Bengal that I feel compelled to tender resignation of my membership of your cabinet. It is proper that I should set forth in detail the reasons which have prompted me to take this decision at this important juncture of the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent.

1. Before I narrate the remote and immediate causes of my resignation, it may be useful to give a short background of the important events that have taken place during the period of my co-operation with the League. Having been approached by a few prominent League leaders of Bengal in February 1943, I agreed to work with them in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. After the fall of the Fazlul Haq ministry in March 1943, with a party of 21 Scheduled Caste M.L.A.s, I agreed to cooperate with Khwaja Nazimuddin, the then leader of the Muslim League Parliamentary Party who formed the Cabinet in April 1943. Our co-operation was conditional on certain specific terms, such as the inclusion of three Scheduled Caste Ministers in the Cabinet, sanctioning of a sum of Rupees Five Lakhs as annual recurring grant for the education of the Scheduled Castes, and the unqualified application of the communal ratio rules in the matter of appointment to Government services.

2. Apart from these terms, the principal objectives that prompted me to work in co-operation with the Muslim League was, first that the economic interests of the Muslims in Bengal were generally identical with those of the Scheduled Castes. Muslims were mostly cultivators and labourers, and so were members of the Scheduled Castes. One

section of Muslims were fishermen, so was a section of the Scheduled Castes as well, and secondly that the Scheduled Castes and the Muslims were both educationally backward. I was persuaded that my co-operation with the League and its Ministry would lead to the undertaking on a wide scale of legislative and administrative measures which, while promoting the mutual welfare of the vas bulk of Bengal's population, and undermining the foundations of vested interest and privilege, would further the cause of communal peace and harmony. It may be mentioned here that Khwaja Nazimuddin took three Scheduled Caste Ministers in his cabinet and appointed three Parliamentary Secretaries from amongst the members of my community.

SUHRAWARDY MINISTRY

3. After the general elections held in March 1946 Mr. H.S.Suhrawardy became the leader of the League Parliamentary Party in March 1946 and formed the League Ministry in April 1946. I was the only Scheduled Caste member returned on the federation ticket. I was included in Mr. Suhrawardy's Cabinet. The 16th day of August of that year was observed in Calcutta as 'The Direct Action Day' by the Muslim League. It resulted, as you know, in a holocaust. Hindus demanded my resignation from the League Ministry. My life was in peril. I began to receive threatening letters almost every day. But I remained steadfast to my policy. Moreover, I issued an appeal through our journal 'Jagaran' to the Scheduled Caste people to keep themselves aloof from the bloody feud between the Congress and the Muslim League even at the risk of my life. I cannot but gratefully acknowledge the fact that I was saved from the wrath of infuriated Hindu mobs by my Caste Hindu neighbours. The Calcutta carnage was followed by the 'Noakhali Riot' in October 1946. There, Hindus including Scheduled Castes were killed and hundreds were converted to Islam. Hindu women were raped and abducted. Members of my community also suffered loss of life and property. Immediately after these happenings, I visited Tipperah and Feni and saw some riot-affected areas. The terrible sufferings of Hindus overwhelmed me with grief, but still I continued the policy of co-operation with the Muslim League. Immediately after the massive Calcutta Killing, a no-confidence motion was moved against the Suhrawardy Ministry. It was only due to my efforts that the support of four Anglo-Indian Members and of four Scheduled Caste members of the Assembly who had hitherto been with the Congress could be secured, but for which the Ministry would have been defeated.

4. In October 1946, most unexpectedly came to me through Mr. Suhrawardy the offer of a seat in the Interim Government of India. After a good deal of hesitation and being given only one hour's time to take my final decision, I consented to accept the offer subject to the condition only that I should be permitted to resign if my leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar disapproved of my action. Fortunately, however, I received his approval in a telegram sent from London. Before I left for Delhi to take over as Law Member, I persuaded Mr. Suhrawardy, the then Chief Minister of Bengal, to agree to take two Ministers in his Cabinet in my place and to appoint two Parliamentary Secretaries from the Scheduled Case Federation Group.

5. I joined the Interim Government on November 1, 1946. After about a month when I

paid a visit to Calcutta, Mr.Suhrawardy apprised me of the communal tension in some parts of East Bengal, especially in Gopalganj Sub-division, where the Namahsudras were in majority, being very high. He requested me to visit those areas and address meetings of Muslims and Namahsudras. The fact was that Namahsudras in those areas had made preparations for retaliation. I addressed about a dozen of largely attended meetings. The result was that Namahsudras gave up the idea of retaliation. Thus an inevitable dangerous communal disturbance was averted.

6. After a few months, the British Government made their June 3 Statement (1947) embodying certain proposals for the partition of India. The whole country, especially the entire non-Muslim India, was startled. For the sake of truth I must admit that I had always considered the demand of Pakistan by the Muslim League as a bargaining counter. Although I honestly felt that in the context of India as a whole Muslims had legitimate cause for grievance against upper class Hindu chauvinism, I held the view very strongly indeed that the creation of Pakistan would never solve the communal problem. On the contrary, it would aggravate communal hatred and bitterness. Besides, I maintained that it would not ameliorate the condition of Muslims in Pakistan. The inevitable result of the partition of the country would be to prolong, if not perpetuate, the poverty, illiteracy and miserable condition of the toiling masses of both the States. I further apprehended that Pakistan might turn to be one of the most backward and undeveloped countries of the South East Asia.

LAHORE RESOLUTION

7. I must make it clear that I have thought that an attempt would be made, as is being done at present, to develop Pakistan as a purely 'Islamic' State based on the Shariat and the injunctions and formulae of Islam. I presumed that it would be set up in all essentials after the pattern contemplated in the Muslim League resolution adopted at Lahore on March 23, 1940. That resolution stated inter alia that (I) "geographically contiguous areas are demarcated into regions which should be constituted with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in majority as in the north-western and eastern zones of India, should be grouped to constitute independent States in which the Constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign" and (II) "adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards should be specifically provided in the Constitution for minorities in these units and in these regions for the protection of their religious, cultural, political, administrative and other rights and interests in consultation with them." Implicitly in this formula were (a) that North western and eastern Muslim zones should be constituted into two independent States, (b) that the constituent units of these States should be autonomous and sovereign, (c) that minorities' guarantee should be in respect of rights as well as of interest and extend to every sphere of their lives, and (d) that Constitutional provisions should be made in these regards in consultation with the minorities themselves. I was fortified in my faith in this resolution and the professions of the League Leadership by the statement Qaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah was pleased to make on the 11th August 1947 as the President of the Constituent Assembly giving solemn assurance of equal treatment for Hindus & Muslims alike and calling upon them to remember that they were all Pakistanis. There

was then no question of dividing he people on the basis of religion into full-fledged Muslim citizens and zimmies
[i]

[1] being under the perpetual custody of the Islamic State and its Muslims citizens. Every one of these pledges is being flagrantly violated apparently to your knowledge and with your approval in complete disregard of the Qaid-e-Azam's wishes and sentiments and to the detriment and humiliation of the minorities.

PARTITION OF BENGAL
8. It may also be mentioned in this connection that I was opposed to the partition of Bengal. In launching a campaign in this regard I had to face not only tremendous resistance from all quarters but also unspeakable abuse, insult and dishonour. With great regret, I recollect those days when 32 crores of Hindus of this Indo-Pakistan Sub-continent turned their back against me and dubbed me as the enemy of Hindus and Hinduism, but I remained undaunted and unmoved in my loyalty to Pakistan. It is a matter of gratitude that my appeal to 7 million Scheduled Caste people of Pakistan evoked a ready and enthusiastic response from them. They lent me their unstinted support sympathy and encouragement.

9. After the establishment of Pakistan on August 14, 1947 you formed the Pakistan Cabinet, in which I was included and Khwaja Nazimuddin formed a provisional Cabinet for East Bengal. On August 10, I had spoken to Khwaja Nazimuddin at Karachi and requested him to take 2 Scheduled Caste Ministers in the East Bengal Cabinet. He promised to do the same sometime later. What happened subsequently in this regard was a record of unpleasant and disappointing negotiation with you, Khwaja Nazimuddin and Mr. Nurul Amin, the present Chief Minister of East Bengal. When I realised that Khwaja Nazimuddin was avoiding the issue on this or that excuse, I became almost impatient and exasperated. I further discussed the matter with the Presidents of the Pakistan Muslim League and its East Bengal Branch. Ultimately, I brought the matter to your notice. You were pleased to discuss the subject with Khwaja Nazimuddin in my presence at your residence. Khwaja Nazimuddin agreed to take one Scheduled Caste Minister on his return to Dacca. As I had already became sceptic about the assurance of Khwaja Nazimuddin, I wanted to be definite about the time-frame. I insisted that he must act in this regard with a month, failing which I should be at liberty to resign. Both you and Khwaja Nazimuddin agreed to the condition. But alas! you did not perhaps mean what you said. Khwaja Nazimuddin did not keep his promise. After Mr. Nurul Amin had became the Chief Minister of East Bengal, I again took up the matter with him. He also followed the same old familiar tactics of evasion. When I again called your attention to this matter prior to your visit to Dacca in 1949, you were pleased to assure me that Minority Ministers would be appointed in East Bengal, and you asked 2/3 names from me for consideration. In stat deference to your wish, I sent you a note stating the Federation Group in the East Bengal Assembly and suggesting three names. When I made enquiries as to what had happened on your return from Dacca, you appeared to be very cold and only remarked : "Let Nurul Amin return from Delhi". After a few days I

again pressed the matter. But you avoided the issue. I was then forced to come to the conclusion that neither you not Mr. Nurul Amin had any intention to take any Scheduled Caste Minister in the East Bengal Cabinet. Apart from this, I was noticing that Mr. Nurul Amin and some League leaders of East Bengal were trying to create disruption among the Members of the Scheduled Caste Federation. It appeared to me that my leadership and wide-spread popularity were considered ominous. My outspokenness, vigilance and sincere efforts to safeguard the interests of the minorities of Pakistan, in general, and of the Scheduled Caste, in particular, were considered a matter on annoyance to the East Bengal Govt. and few League leaders. Undaunted, I took my firm stand to safeguard the interests of the minorities of Pakistan.

ANTI-HINDU POLICY

10. When the question of partition of Bengal arose, the Scheduled Caste people were alarmed at the anticipated dangerous result of partition. Representation on their behalf were made to Mr. Suhrawardy, the then Chief Minister of Bengal who was pleased to issue a statement to the press declaring that none of the rights and privileges hitherto enjoyed by the Scheduled Caste People would be curtailed after partition and that they would not only continue to enjoy the existing rights and privileges but also receive additional advantages. This assurance was given by Mr. Suhrawardy not only in his personal capacity but also in his capacity as the Chief Minister of the League Ministry. To my utter regret it is to be stated that after partition, particularly after the death of Qaid-e-Azam, the Scheduled Castes have not received a fair deal in any matter. You will recollect that from time to time I brought the grievances of the Scheduled Castes to your notice. I explained to you on several occasions the nature of inefficient administration in East Bengal. I made serious charges against the police administration. I brought to your notice incidents of barbarous atrocities perpetrated by the police on frivolous grounds. I did not hesitate to bring to your notice the anti-Hindu policy pursued by the East Bengal Government especially the police administration and a section of Muslim League leaders.

SOME INCIDENTS

11. The first incident that shocked me took place at a village called Digharkul near Gopalganj where on the false complaint of a Muslim brutal atrocities were committed on the local Namahsudras. The fact was that a Muslim who was going in a boat attempted to throw his net to catch fish. A Namahsudra who was already there for the same purpose opposed the throwing of the net in his front. This was followed by some altercation and the Muslim got annoyed and went to the nearby Muslim village and made a false complaint that he and a woman in his boat had been assaulted by the Namahsudras. At that time, the S.D.O. of Gopalganj was passing in a boat through the canal, who without making any enquiry accepted the complaint as true and sent armed police to the spot to punish the Namahsudras. The armed police came and the local Muslims also joined them. They not only raided some houses of the Namahsudras but mercilessly beat both men and women, destroyed their properties and took away valuables. The merciless beating of a pregnant women resulted in abortion on the spot. This brutal action on the part of the local authority created panic over a large area.

12. The second incidence of police oppression took place in early part of 1949 under P.S. Gournadi in the district of Barisal. Here a quarrel took place between two groups of members of a Union Board. One group which was in the good books of the police conspired against the opponents on the plea of their being Communists. On the information of a threat of attack on the Police Station, the O.C., Gournadi requisitioned armed forces from the headquarters. The Police, helped by the armed forces, then raided a large number of houses in the area, took away valuable properties, even from the house of absentee-owners who were never in politics, far less in the Communist Party. A large number of persons over a wide area were arrested. Teachers and students of many High English Schools were Communist suspects and unnecessarily harassed. This area being very near to my native village, I was informed of the incident. I wrote to the District Magistrate and the S.P. for an enquiry. A section of the local people also prayed for an enquiry by the S.D.O. But no enquiry was held. Even my letters to the District authorities were not acknowledged. I then brought this matter to the notice of the highest Authority in Pakistan, including yourself but to no avail.

WOMEN FOR MILITARY

13. The atrocities perpetrated by the police and the military on the innocent Hindus, especially the Scheduled Castes of Habibgarh in the District of Sylhet deserve description. Innocent men and women were brutally tortured, some women ravished, their houses raided and properties looted by the police and the local Muslims. Military pickets were posted in the area. The military not only oppressed these people and took away stuff forcibly from Hindu houses, but also forced Hindus to send their women-folk at night to the camp to satisfy the carnal desires of the military. This fact also I brought to your notice. You assured me of a report on the matter, but unfortunately no report was forthcoming.

14. Then occurred the incident at the Nachole in the District of Rajshahi where in the name of suppression of Communists not only the police but also the local Muslims in collaboration with the police oppressed the Hindus and looted their properties. The Santhals then crossed the border and came over to West Bengal. They narrated the stories of atrocities wantonly committed by the Muslims and the police.

15. An instance of callous and cold-blooded brutality is furnished by the incident that took place on December 20, 1949 in Kalshira under P.S. Mollarhat in the District of Khulna. What happened was that late at night four constables raided the house of one Joydev Brahma in village Kalshira in search of some alleged Communists. At the scent of the police, half a dozen of young men, some of whom might have been Communists, escaped from the house. The police constable entered into the house and assaulted the wife of Joydev Brahma whose cry attracted her husband and a few companions who escaped from the house. They became desperate, re-entered the house, found 4 constables with one gun only. That perhaps might have encouraged the young men who struck a blow on an armed constable who died on the spot. The young men then attacked another constable when the other two ran away and raised alarm which attracted some neighbouring people who came to their rescue. As the incident took

place before sunrise when it was dark, the assailants fled with the dead body before the villagers could come. The S.P. of Khulna with a contingent of military and armed police appeared on the scene in the afternoon of the following day. In the meantime, the assailants fled and the intelligent neighbours also fled away. But the bulk of the villagers remained in their houses as they were absolutely innocent and failed to realise the consequence of the happening. Subsequently, the S.P., the military and armed police began to beat mercilessly the innocents of the entire village, encouraged the neighbouring Muslims to take away their properties. A number of persons were killed and men and women were forcibly converted. House-hold deities were broken and places of worship desecrated and destroyed. Several women were raped by the police, military and local Muslims. Thus a veritable hell was let loose not only in the village of Kalshira which is 1-1/2 miles in length with a large population, but also in a number of neighbouring Namahsudra villages. The village Kalshira was never suspected by the authority to be a place of Communist activities. Another village called Jhalardanga, which was at a distance of 3 miles from Kalshira, was known to be a centre of Communist activities. This village was raided by a large contingent of police on that day for hunt of the alleged Communists, a number of whom fled away and took shelter in the aforesaid house of village Kalshira which was considered to be a safe place for them.

16. I visited Kalshira and one or two neighbouring villages on the 28th February 1950. The S.P., Khulna and some of the prominent League leaders of the district were with me. When I came to the village Kalshira, I found the place desolate and in ruins. I was told in the presence of S.P. that there were 350 homesteads in this village, of these, only three had been spared and the rest had been demolished. Country boats and heads of cattle belonging to the Namasudras had been all taken away. I reported these facts to the Chief Minister, Chief Secretary and Inspector of General of Police of East Bengal and to you.

17. It may be mentioned in this connection that the news of this incident was published in West Bengal Press and this created some unrest among the Hindus there. A number of sufferers of Kalshira, both men and women, homeless and destitute had also come to Calcutta and narrated the stories of their sufferings which resulted in some communal disturbances in West Bengal in the last part of January.

CAUSES OF THE FEBRUARY DISTURBANCE

18. It must be noted that stories of a few incidents of communal disturbance that took place in West Bengal as a sort of repercussion of the incidents at Kalshira were published in exaggerated form in he East Bengal press. In the second week of February 1950 when the Budget Session of the East Bengal Assembly commenced, the Congress Members sought permission to move two adjournment motions to discuss the situation created at Kalshira and Nachole. But the motions were disallowed. The Congress members walked out of the Assembly in protest. This action of the Hindu members of the Assembly annoyed and enraged not only the Ministers but also the Muslim leaders and officials of the Province. This was perhaps one of the principal reasons for Dacca and East Bengal riots in February 1950.

19. It is significant that on February 10, 1950 at about 10 o'clock in the morning a woman was painted with red to show that her breast was cut off in Calcutta riot, and was taken round the East Bengal Secretariat at Dacca. Immediately the Government servants of the Secretariat stuck work and came out in procession raising slogans of revenge against the Hindus. The procession began to swell as it passed over a distance of more than a mile. It ended in a meeting at Victoria Park at about 12 o'clock in the noon where violent speeches against the Hindus were delivered by several speakers, including officials. The fun of the whole show was that while the employees of the Secretariat went out of procession, the Chief Secretary of the East Bengal Government was holding a conference with his West Bengal counterpart in the same building to find out ways and means to stop communal disturbances in the two Bengals.

OFFICIALS HELPED LOOTERS

20. The riot started at about 1 p.m. simultaneously all over the city. Arson, looting of Hindu shops and houses and killing of Hindus, wherever they were found, commenced in full swing in all parts of the city. I got evidence even from the Muslims that arson and looting were committed even in the presence of high police officials. Jewellery shops belonging to the Hindus were looted in the presence of police officers. They not only did not attempt to stop loot, but also helped the looters with advice and direction. Unfortunately for me, I reached Dacca at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on the same day, in February10, 1950. To my utter dismay, I had occasion to see and know things from close quarters. What I saw and learnt from firsthand information was simply staggering and heart-rending.

BACKGROUND OF THE RIOT

21. The reasons for the Dacca riot were mainly five:

(i) To punish the Hindus for the daring action of their representatives in the Assembly in their expression of protest by walking out of the Assembly when two adjournment motions on Kalshira and Nachole affairs were disallowed.

(ii) Dissension and differences between the Suhrawardy Group and the Nazimuddin Group in the Parliamentary Party were becoming acute.

(iii) Apprehension of launching of a movement for re-union of East and West Bengal by both Hindu and Muslim leaders made the East Bengal Ministry and the Muslim League nervous. They wanted to prevent such a move. They though that any large-scale communal riot in East Bengal was sure to produce reactions in West Bengal where Muslims might be killed. The result of such riots in both East and West Bengal, it was believed, would prevent any movement for re-union of Bengals.

(iv) Feeling of antagonism between the Bengali Muslims and non-Bengali Muslims in East Bengal was gaining ground. This could only be prevented by creating hatred between Hindus and Muslims of East Bengal. The language question was also connected with it and

(v) The consequences of non-devaluation and the Indo-Pakistan trade deadlock to the economy of East Bengal were being felt most acutely first in urban and rural areas and the Muslim League members and officials wanted to divert the attention of the Muslim masses from the impending economic breakdown by some sort of Jihad against Hindus.

STAGGERING DETAILS - NEARLY 10,000 KILLED

22. During my nine days' stay at Dacca, I visited most of the riot-affected areas of the city and suburbs. I visited Mirpur also under P.S. Tejgaon. The news of the killing of hundreds of innocent Hindus in trains, on railway lines between Dacca and Narayanganj, and Dacca and Chittagong gave me the rudest shock. On the second day of Dacca riot, I met the Chief Minister of East Bengal and requested him to issue immediate instructions to the District authorities to take all precautionary measures to prevent spreading of the riot in district towns and rural areas. On the 20th February 1950, I reached Barisal town and was astounded to know of the happenings in Barisal. In the District town, a number of Hindu houses were burnt and a large number of Hindus killed. I visited almost all riot-affected areas in the District. I was simply puzzled to find the havoc wrought by the Muslim rioters even at places like Kasipur, Madhabpasha and Lakutia which were within a radius of six miles from the District town and were connected with motorable roads. At the Madhabpasha Zamindar's house, about 200 people were killed and 40 injured. A place, called Muladi, witnessed a dreadful hell. At Muladi Bandar alone, the number killed would total more than three hundred, as was reported to me by the local Muslims including some officers. I visited Muladi village also, where I found skeletons of dead bodies at some places. I found dogs and vultures eating corpses on he river-side. I got the information there that after the whole-scale killing of all adult males, all the young girls were distributed among the ringleaders of the miscreants. At a place called Kaibartakhali under P.S. Rajapur, 63 persons were killed. Hindu houses within a stone's throw distance from the said thana office were looted, burnt and inmates killed. All Hindu shops of Babuganj Bazar were looted and then burnt and a large number of Hindus were killed. From detailed information received, the conservative estimate of casualties was placed at 2,500 killed in the District of Barisal alone. Total casualties of Dacca and East Bengal riot were estimated to be in the neighbourhood of 10,000 killed. The lamentation of women and children who had lost their all including near and dear ones melted my heart. I only asked myself "What was coming to Pakistan in the name of Islam."

NO EARNEST DESIRE TO IMPLEMENT DELHI PACT

23. The large scale exodus of Hindus from Bengal commenced in the latter part of March. It appeared that within a short time all the Hindus would migrate to India. A war cry was raised in India. The situation became extremely critical. A national calamity appeared to be inevitable. The apprehended disaster, however, was avoided by the Delhi Agreement of April 8. With a view to reviving the already lost morale of the panicky Hindus, I undertook an extensive tour of East Bengal. I visited a number of places of the districts of Dacca, Barisal, Faridpur, Khulna and Jessore. I addressed dozens of largely attended meetings and asked the Hindus to take courage and not to leave their ancestral hearths and homes. I had this expectation that the East Bengal Govt. and Muslim League

leaders would implement the terms of the Delhi Agreement. But with the lapse of time, I began to realise that neither the East Bengal Govt. nor the Muslim League leaders were really earnest in the matter of implementation of the Delhi Agreement. The East Bengal Govt. was not only ready to set up a machinery as envisaged in the Delhi Agreement, but also was not willing to take effective steps for the purpose. A number of Hindus who returned to native village immediately after the Delhi Agreement were not given possession of their homes and lands which were occupied in the meantime by the Muslims.

MOULANA AKRAM KHAN'S INCITATIONS

24. My suspicion about the intention of League leaders was confirmed when I read editorial comments by Moulana Akram Khan, the President of the Provincial Muslim League in the "Baisak" issue of a monthly journal called 'Mohammadi'. In commenting on the first radio-broadcast of Dr.A.M.Malik, Minister for Minority Affairs of Pakistan, from Dacca Radio Station, wherein he said, "Even Prophet Mohammed had given religious freedom to the Jews in Arabia", Moulana Akram Khan said, "Dr.Malik would have done well had he not made any reference in his speech to the Jews of Arabia. It is true that the Jews in Arabia had been given religious freedom by Prophet Mohammed; but it was the first chapter of the history. The last chapter contains the definite direction of prophet Mohammed which runs as follows:- "Drive away all the Jews out of Arabia". Even despite this editorial comment of a person who held a very high position in the political, social and spiritual life of the Muslim community, I entertained some expectation that the Nurul Amin Ministry might not be so insincere. But that expectation of mine was totally shattered when Mr.Nurul Amin selected D.N.Barari as a Minister to represent the minorities in terms of the Delhi Agreement which clearly states that to restore confidence in the minds of the minorities one of their representatives will be taken in the Ministry of East Bengal and West Bengal Govt.

NURUL AMIN GOVERNMENT'S INSINCERITY

25. In one of my public statement, I expressed the view that the appointment of D.N.Barari as a Minister representing the minorities not only did not help restore any confidence, but, on the contrary, destroyed all expectations illusions, if there was any in the minds of the minorities about the sincerity of Mr.Nurul Amin's Govt. My own reaction was that Mr.Nurul Amin's Govt. was not only insincere but also wanted to defeat the principal objectives of the Delhi Agreement. I again repeat that D.N.Barari does not represent anybody except himself. He was returned to the Bengal Legislature Assembly on the Congress ticket with the money and organisation of the Congress. He opposed the Scheduled Caste Federation candidates. Some time after his election, he betrayed the Congress and joined the Federation. When he was appointed a Minister he had ceased to be a member of the Federation too. I know that East Bengal Hindus agree with me that by antecedents, character and intellectual attainments Barari is not qualified to hold the position of a Minister as envisaged in the Delhi Agreement.

26. I recommended three names to Mr.Nurul Amin for this office. One of the persons I recommended was an MA.,LL.B., Advocate, Dacca High Court. He was Minister for more

than 4 years in the first Fazlul Huq Ministry in Bengal. He was chairman of the Coal Mines Stowing Board, Calcutta, for about 6 years. He was the senior Vice-President of the Scheduled Caste Federation. My second nominee was a B.A., LL.B. He was a member of the Legislative Council for 7 years in the pre-reform regime. I would like to know what earthly reasons there might be for Mr.Nurul Amin in not selecting any of these two gentlemen and appointing instead a person whose appointment as Minister I strongly objected to for very rightly considerations. Without any fear of contradiction I can say that this action of Mr.Nurul Amin in selecting Barari as a Minister in terms of the Delhi Agreement is conclusive proof that the East Bengal Govt. was neither serious nor sincere in its professions about the terms of the Delhi Agreement whose main purpose is to create such conditions as would enable the Hindus to continue to live in East Bengal with a sense of security to their life, property, honour and religion.

GOVERNMENT PLAN TO SQUEEZE OUT HINDUS

27. I would like to reiterate in this connection my firm conviction that East Bengal Govt. is still following the well-planned policy of squeezing Hindus out of the Province. in my discussion with you on more than one occasion, I gave expression to this view of mine. I must say that this policy of driving out Hindus from Pakistan has succeeded completely in West Pakistan and is nearing completion in East Pakistan too. The appointment of D.N.Barari as a Minister and the East Bengal Government's unceremonious objection to my recommendation in this regard strictly conform to name of what they call an Islamic State. Pakistan has not given the Hindus entire satisfaction and a full sense of security. They now want to get rid of the Hindu intelligentsia so that the political, economic and social life of Pakistan may not in any way be influenced by them.

EVASIVE TACTICS TO SHELVE JOINT ELECTORATE

28. I have failed to understand why the question of electorate has not yet been decided. It is now three years that the minority Sub-Committee has been appointed. It sat on three occasions. The question of having joint or separation electorate came up for consideration at a meting of the Committee held in December last when all the representatives of recognised minorities in Pakistan expressed their view in support of Joint Electorate with reservation of seats for backward minorities. We, on behalf of the Scheduled Castes, demanded joint electorate with reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes. This matter again came up for consideration at a meeting called in August last. But without any discussion whatsoever on this point, the meeting was adjourned sine die. It is not difficult to understand what the motive is behind this kind of evasive tactics in regard to such a vital matter on the part of Pakistan's rulers.

DISMAL FUTURE FOR HINDUS

29. Coming now to the present condition and the future of Hindus in East Bengal as a result of the Delhi Agreement, I should say that the present condition is not only unsatisfactory but absolutely hopeless and that the future completely dark and dismal. Confidence of Hindus in East Bengal has not been restored in the least. The Agreement is treated as a mere scrap of paper alike by the East Bengal Government and the Muslim League. That a pretty large number of Hindus migrants, mostly Scheduled Caste

cultivators are returning to East Bengal is no indication that confidence has been restored. It only indicates that their stay and rehabilitation in West Bengal, or elsewhere in the Indian Union have not been possible. The sufferings of refugee life are compelling them to go back to their homes. Besides, many of them are going back to bring movable articles and settle or dispose of immovable properties. That no serious communal disturbance has recently taken place in East Bengal is not to be attributed to the Delhi Agreement. It could not simply continue even if there were no Agreement or Pact.

30. It must be admitted that the Delhi Pact was not an end in itself. It was intended that such conditions would be created as might effectively help resolve so many disputes and conflict existing between India and Pakistan. But during this period of six months after the Agreement, no dispute or conflict has really been resolved. On the contrary, communal propaganda and anti-India propaganda by Pakistan both at home and abroad are continuing in full swing. The observance of Kashmir Day by the Muslim League all over Pakistan is an eloquent proof of communal anti-India propaganda by Pakistan. The recent speech of the Governor of Punjab (Pak) saying that Pakistan needed a strong Army for the security of Indian Muslims has betrayed the real attitude of Pakistan towards India. It will only increase the tension between the two countries.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN EAST BENGAL TODAY

31. What is today the condition in East Bengal? About fifty lakhs of Hindus have left since the partition of the country. Apart from the East Bengal riot of last February, the reasons for such a large scale exodus of Hindus are many. The boycott by the Muslims of Hindu lawyers, medical practitioners, shop-keepers, traders and merchants has compelled Hindus to migrate to West Bengal in search of their means of livelihood. Wholesale requisition of Hindu houses even without following due process of law in many and non-payment of any rent whatsoever to the owners have compelled them to seek for Indian shelter. Payments of rent to Hindu landlords was stopped long before. Besides, the Ansars against whom I received complaints all over are a standing menace to the safety and security of Hindus. Inference in matters of education and methods adopted by the Education Authority for Islamisation frightened the teaching staff of Secondary Schools and Colleges out of their old familiar moorings. They have left East Bengal. As a result, most of the educational institutions have been closed. I have received information that sometime ago the Educational Authority issued circular in Secondary Schools enjoining compulsory participation of teachers and students of all communities in recitation from the Holy Koran before the school work commenced. Another circular requires Headmasters of schools to name the different blocks of the premises after 12 distinguished Muslims, such as, Jinnah, Iqbal, Liaquat Ali, Nazimuddin, etc. Only very recently in an educational conference held at Dacca, the President disclosed that out of 1,500 High English Schools in East Bengal, only 500 were working. Owing to the migration of Medical Practitioners there is hardly any means of proper treatment of patients. Almost all the priests who used to worship the household deities at Hindu houses have left. Important places of worship have been abandoned. The result is that the Hindus of East Bengal have got now hardly any means to follow religious pursuits and performance of social ceremonies like marriage where the services of a priest are essential. Artisans

who made images of gods and goddesses have also left. Hindu Presidents of Union Boards have been replaced by Muslims by coercive measures with the active help and connivance of the police and Circle Officers. Hindu Headmasters and Secretaries of Schools have been replaced by Muslims. The Life of the few Hindu Govt. servants has been made extremely miserable as many of them have either been superseded by junior Muslims or dismissed without sufficient or any cause. Only very recently a Hindu Public Prosecutor of Chittagong was arbitrarily removed from service as has been made clear in a statement made by Srijukta Nellie Sengupta against whom at least no change of anti-Muslim bias prejudice or malice can be leveled.

HINDUS VIRTUALLY OUTLAWED

32. Commission of thefts and dacoities even with murder is going on as before. Thana offices seldom record half the complaints made by the Hindus. That the abduction and rape of Hindu girls have been reduced to a certain extent is due only to the fact that there is no Caste Hindu girl between the ages of 12 and 30 living in East Bengal at present. The few depressed class girls who live in rural areas with their parents are not even spared by Muslim goondas. I have received information about a number of incidents of rape of Scheduled Caste Girls by Muslims. Full payment is seldom made by Muslims buyers for the price of jute and other agricultural commodities sold by Hindus in market places. As a matter of fact, there is no operation of law, justice or fair-play in Pakistan, so far as Hindus are concerned.

FORCED CONVERSIONS IN WEST PAKISTAN

33. Leaving aside the question of East Pakistan, let me now refer to West Pakistan, especially Sind. The West Punjab had after partition about a lakh of Scheduled Castes people. It may be noted that a large number of them were converted to Islam. Only 4 out of a dozen Scheduled Castes girls abducted by Muslims have yet been recovered in spite of repeated petitions to the Authority. Names of those girls with names of their abductors were supplied to the government. The last reply recently given by the Officer-in-Charge of recovery of abducted girls said that "his function was to recover Hindu girls and 'Achhuts' (Scheduled Castes) were not Hindus". The condition of the small number of Hindus that are still living in Sind and Karachi, the capital of Pakistan, is simply deplorable. I have got a list of 363 Hindu temples and gurdwaras of Karachi and Sind (which is by no means an exhaustive list) which are still in possession of Muslims. Some of the temples have been converted into cobbler's shops, slaughter houses and hotels. None of the Hindus has got back. Possession of their landed properties were taken away from them without any notice and distributed amongst refugees and local Muslims. I personally know that 200 to 300 Hindus were declared non-evacuees by the Custodian a pretty long time ago. But up till now properties have no been restored to any one of them. Even the possession of Karachi Pinjirapole[ii]

[2] has not been restored to the trustees, although it was declared non-evacuee property sometime ago. In Karachi I had received petitions from many unfortunate fathers and husbands of abducted Hindu girls, mostly Scheduled Castes. I drew the attention of the

2nd Provisional Government to this fact. There was little or no effect. To my extreme regret I received information that a large number of Scheduled Castes who are still living in Sind have been forcibly converted to Islam.

PAKISTAN 'ACCURSED' FOR HINDUS

34. Now this being in brief the overall picture of Pakistan so far as the Hindus are concerned, I shall not be unjustified in stating that Hindus of Pakistan have to all intents and purposes been rendered "Stateless" in their own houses. They have no other fault than that they profess the Hindu religion. Declarations are being repeatedly made by Muslim League leaders that Pakistan is and shall be an Islamic State. Islam is being offered as the sovereign remedy for all earthly evils. In the matchless dialectics of capitalism and socialism you present the exhilarating democratic synthesis of Islamic equality and fraternity. In that grand setting of the Shariat Muslims alone are rulers while Hindus and other minorities are zimmies who are entitled to protection at price, and you know more than anybody else Mr.Prime Minister, what that price is. After anxious and prolonged struggle I have come to the conclusion that Pakistan is no place for Hindus to live in and that their future is darkened by the ominous shadow of conversion or liquidation. The bulk of the upper class Hindus and politically conscious scheduled castes have left East Bengal. Those Hindus who will continue to stay accursed in Pakistan will, I am afraid, by gradual stages and in a planned manner be either converted to Islam or completely exterminated. It is really amazing that a man of your education, culture and experience should be an exponent of a doctrine fraught with so great a danger to humanity and subversive of all principles of equality and good sense. I may tell you and your fellow workers that Hindus will allow themselves, whatever the treat or temptation, to be treated as Zimmies in the land of their birth. Today they may, as indeed many of them have already done, abandon their hearths and homes in sorrow but in panic. Tomorrow they strive for their rightful place in the economy of life. Who knows what is in the womb of the future ? When I am convinced that my continuance in office in the Pakistan Central Government is not of any help to Hindus I should not with a clear conscience, create the false impression in the minds of the Hindus of Pakistan and peoples abroad that Hindus can live there with honour and with a sense of security in respect of their life, property and religion. This is about Hindus.

NO CIVIL LIBERTY EVEN FOR MUSLIMS

35. And what about the Muslims who are outside the charmed circle of the League rulers and their corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy ? There is hardly anything called civil liberty in Pakistan . Witness for example, the fate of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan than whom a more devout Muslim had not walked this earth for many years and of his gallant patriotic brother Dr. Khan Sahib. A large number of erstwhile League leaders of the Northwest and also of the Eastern belt of Pakistan are in detention without trial. Mr. Suhrawardy to whom is due in a large measure the League's triumph in Bengal is for practical purpose a Pakistani prisoner who has to move under permit and open his lips under orders. Mr. Fazlul Haq, that dearly loved grand old man of Bengal, who was the author of that now famous Lahore resolution, is ploughing his lonely furrow in the precincts of the Dacca High Court of Judicature, and the so called Islamic planning is as ruthless as it is

complete. About the East Bengal Muslims general, the less said the better. They were promised of autonomous and sovereign units of the independent State. What have they got instead ? East Bengal has been transformed into a colony of the western belt of Pakistan, although it contained a population which is larger than that of all the units of Pakistan put together. It is a pale ineffective adjunct of Karachi doing the latter's bidding and carrying out its orders. East Bengal Muslims in their enthusiasm wanted bread and they have by the mysterious working of the Islamic State and the Shariat got stone instead from the arid deserts of Sind and the Punjab.

MY OWN SAD AND BITTER EXPERIENCE

36. Leaving aside the overall picture of Pakistan and the callous and cruel injustice done to others, my own personal experience is no less sad, bitter and revealing. You used your position as the Prime Minister and leader of the Parliamentary Party to ask me to issue a statement, which I did on the 8th September last. You know that I was not willing to make a statement containing untruths and half truths, which were worse that untruths. It was not possible for me to reject your request so long as I was there working as a Minister with you and under your leadership. But I can no longer afford to carry this load of false pretensions and untruth on my conscience and I have decided to offer my resignation as your Minister, which I am hereby placing in your hands and which, I hope, you will accept without delay. You are of course at liberty to dispense with that office or dispose of it in such a manner as may suit adequately and effectively the objectives of your Islamic State.

Yours sincerely,
Sd./- J.N. Mandal
8th October 1950

[i][1] A zimmi is a Non-Muslim in an Islamic state who pays the capitation tax called Jizyah and obtains protection.

[ii][2] A pinjirapole is a sanctuary for old bulls and cows, maintained usually by municipal authorities in India or by Hindu charitable institutions or individuals.